



The Sword

in Early Medieval
Northern Europe



**Experience, Identity,
Representation**

Sue Brunning

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Professor John Hines, School of History, Archaeology and Religion,
Cardiff University, John Percival Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff, Wales,
CF10 3EU, UK

Professor Catherine Cubitt, School of History, Faculty of Arts and
Humanities, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England, NR4 7TJ, UK
Boydell & Brewer, PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, IP12 3DF, UK

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THE SWORD
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTHERN EUROPE

Experience, Identity, Representation

Sue Brunning

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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*For my mother Chrissie, my father Bob,
and my partner Nathan*

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction: Swords in Mind	1
1 Image	18
2 Archaeology	59
3 Text	111
4 'Living' Swords	139
Postscript	157
Appendix: Images and Swords Referenced in the Text	159
<i>Bibliography</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	207

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1: Parts of an early medieval sword. © Sue Brunning	20
Fig. 2: Sword with sword-belt, buckle and strap-end. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scenes 8–9 (No. 1). © With special permission from the city of Bayeux	21
Fig. 3: Warriors with sheathed swords. Helmet, boat grave XIV, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden (No. 6). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	22
Fig. 4: ULFBERHT swords. (a) Sword of Orion. © The British Library Board, Cotton Tiberius B.V., fol. 39 (No. 15). (b) Sword from Norway. © The National Museum of Denmark, accession no. 780	24
Fig. 5: Patterned sword. Embroidery fragment, ship burial, Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway (No. 2). © Kulturhistorisk Museum, Universitetet i Oslo	25
Fig. 6: Two warriors, ring-sword circled. <i>Pressblech</i> die, Torslunda, Öland, Sweden (No. 19). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	26
Fig. 7: Abraham sacrificing Isaac. © The British Library Board, Cotton Claudius B.IV, fol. 38 (No. 8)	28
Fig. 8: Petersen Type Z swords. (a) © Sue Brunning. (b) © The British Library Board, Cotton Claudius B.IV, fol. 58v (No. 8)	28
Fig. 9: Sword with tri-lobed pommel outlined. Cross-shaft fragment, All Saints Church, Brailsford, Derbyshire (No. 28). © Sue Brunning. By kind permission of All Saints Church, Brailsford	31
Fig. 10: King Cnut. © The British Library Board, MS Stowe 944, fol. 6 (No. 29)	32
Fig. 11: Warrior with tri-lobed sword (centre). Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scene 56 (No. 1). © With special permission from the city of Bayeux	33
Fig. 12: Sword orientation in scenes of King Harold. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scenes 31–2 (No. 1). © With special permission from the city of Bayeux	38
Fig. 13: Procession of warriors. Helmet, boat grave XIV, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden (No. 6): Arne and Stolpe, <i>La Nécropole</i> , pl. XLII, fig. 1. © Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien	40

List of Illustrations

Fig. 14: Battle. Picture-stone, 'Stora Hammars I', Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden (No. 10). © Johan Norderäng/Gotland's Museum	43
Fig. 15: Battle. © The British Library Board, Cotton Claudius B.IV, fol. 25 (No. 8)	45
Fig. 16: 'Sword St Peter' coin of Eiríkr 'Bloodaxe', 947–54 (No. 55). © Trustees of the British Museum	46
Fig. 17: Leaders with swords. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scene 61 (No. 1). © With special permission from the city of Bayeux	49
Fig. 18: Figurine of a Valkyrie, Hårby, Funen, Denmark (No. 69). © Arnold Mikkelsen/The National Museum of Denmark	52
Fig. 19: Pommel with worn filigree ornament. Staffordshire Hoard, Fern et al., <i>Staffordshire Hoard</i> , cat. no. 40. © Birmingham Museums Trust	63
Fig. 20: Typical locations for wear on sword hilts, viewed from the broad face (top) and the top (bottom). © Sue Brunning	63
Fig. 21: Ring-sword with worn areas marked. Grave C, Buckland, Dover (Kent) (No. 81). © Trustees of the British Museum	64
Fig. 22: Ring fitting with worn areas marked. Grave 39, Patrixbourne, Bifrons (Kent) (No. 84). © Maidstone Museum. Kent Archaeological Society Collection	65
Fig. 23: Pommel from Lower Shorne, Kent (No. 86). Left: well-preserved face; right: degraded face with worn area marked. © Maidstone Museum. Kent Archaeological Society Collection	66
Fig. 24: Ring fitting with worn areas marked. Grave 88, Sarre (Kent) (No. 88). © Maidstone Museum. Kent Archaeological Society Collection	67
Fig. 25: Pommel with worn areas marked. King's Field, Faversham, Kent (No. 91). © Trustees of the British Museum	68
Fig. 26: Top of pommel with loss of gilding and relief. Boat grave 6, Valsgårde, Uppland, Sweden (No. 95). © Sue Brunning. By kind permission of Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum	70
Fig. 27: Top of pommel with loss of gilding and relief. Ultuna, Bondkyrko, Uppland, Sweden (No. 97). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	71
Fig. 28: Grip mount with worn area marked. Acklam Wold, North Yorkshire (No. 103). © York Museums Trust (Yorkshire Museum), accession number 1981.421	72
Fig. 29: Grip mounts with worn areas marked. Ultuna, Bondkyrko, Uppland, Sweden (No. 97). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	73

List of Illustrations

Fig. 30: Grip with worn areas marked. Boat grave I, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden (No. 101). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm. Photo: Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson	74
Fig. 31: Pommel with inscribed runic letter. King's Field, Faversham (Kent) (No. 91). © Trustees of the British Museum	75
Fig. 32: Pommel from grave 104, Sarre (Kent) (No. 85). © Maidstone Museum. Kent Archaeological Society Collection	77
Fig. 33: Hilt with secondary ring fitting with cutaway cells marked. Vallstenarum, Gotland, Sweden (No. 102). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	79
Fig. 34: Pommel with hole for a ring fitting. Ash, Gilton (Kent) (No. 90). © National Museums Liverpool (World Museum), accession no. M6402	80
Fig. 35: Grip mounts. Vallstenarum, Gotland, Sweden (No. 102). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	82
Fig. 36: Hilt with bent attachment rivet marked. Coombe, Woodnesborough (Kent) (No. 106). © Saffron Walden Museum	84
Fig. 37: Pommel with worn areas marked. Mound 1, Sutton Hoo (Suffolk) (No. 79). © Trustees of the British Museum	90
Fig. 38: Swords cradled or touched in the grave. (a) Grave 56, Buckland, Dover (Kent). (b) Grave 71, Buckland, Dover (Kent). (c) Grave 20, Petersfinger, Wiltshire. By Craig Williams, after Evison, <i>Dover</i> and Leeds and Shortt, <i>Anglo-Saxon Cemetery</i>	94
Fig. 39: Double sword burial, male on left and female on right (as pictured). Grave 96, Buckland, Dover (Kent) (No. 121). By Craig Williams, after Evison, <i>Dover</i>	95
Fig. 40: Hilt with worn areas marked. Wensley Churchyard (North Yorkshire) (No. 130). © Trustees of the British Museum	98
Fig. 41: Hilt with worn areas marked. Grave 561a, Birka, Uppland, Sweden (No. 133). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	99
Fig. 42: Hilt with worn areas marked. Sword 'Ab', boat grave, Haithabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany (No. 134). © Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig. Photo: Claudia Janke	101
Fig. 43: Hilt with worn areas marked. Sword 'Ab1', boat grave, Haithabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany (No. 135). © Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig. Photo: Claudia Janke	102
Fig. 44: Pommel with worn areas marked (detail area outlined). Grave 942, Birka, Uppland, Sweden (No. 137). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm	103

List of Illustrations

Map

Map 1: Northern Europe, showing burial sites referenced in the text. By Craig Williams	60
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Graphs

Graph 1: Wielders of sword types in eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon art	31
Graph 2: Contexts of use for swords in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art	36
Graph 3: Wielders of swords in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art	48
Graph 4: Sword motifs by chronological phase in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art	53
Graph 5: Violent imagery by chronological phase and culture	54
Graph 6: Contexts of use for spears in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art	56
Graph 7: Placement of swords in burials, relative to the deceased's body side	89
Graph 8: Proximity of swords in burials, relative to the deceased	91
Graph 9: Placement of spears in Anglo-Saxon burials, relative to the deceased's body side	92
Graph 10: Proximity of spears in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian burials, relative to the deceased	93
Graph 11: Proximity of swords in later burials, relative to the deceased	105
Graph 12: Proximity of spears in later Scandinavian burials, relative to the deceased	106
Graph 13: Placement of swords in later burials, relative to the deceased's body side	107

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Many years ago, I took a chance on an undergraduate history module about Bede, intrigued to learn what Britain was like during a time when the year had only three numbers. My tutors, Richard and Fiona Gameson, opened a door to the early medieval world that has never since closed. Some years later, another chance brought me to Sonja Marzinzik at the British Museum who introduced me to the people of the past through the things they left behind, and whose guidance, kindness and friendship changed my life. I am delighted to acknowledge these inspirational teachers here.

Abbreviations

In the text, the first reference to a poem and/or poet is made in full, with subsequent references abbreviated as follows. The alphabetical order follows standard Old English (OE) and Old Norse (ON) dictionaries. Skalds' names follow abbreviations given on the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages Project online database at <http://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/db.php?if=default&table=skalds&view=>

Arn.	Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson (ON)
	<i>Har.</i> <i>Haraldrápa</i>
	<i>Hryn.</i> <i>Hrynhenda, Magnússdrápa</i>
	<i>Mag.</i> <i>Magnússdrápa</i>
	<i>Rög.</i> <i>Rognvaldsdrápa</i>
	<i>Þorf.</i> <i>Þorfinnsdrápa</i>
Bersi.	Bersi Skáld-Torfuson (ON)
	<i>Flokk.</i> <i>Flokkur about Óláfr helgi</i>
	<i>Laus.</i> <i>Lausavísur</i>
Bjkrepp.	Björn krepphendi (ON)
	<i>Mag.</i> <i>Magnússdrápa</i>
Brag.	Bragi inn gamli Boddason (ON)
	<i>Rag.</i> <i>Ragnarsdrápa</i>
<i>Brunanburh</i>	<i>The Battle of Brunanburh (OE)</i>
<i>Darr.</i>	<i>Darraðarljóð (ON)</i>
Edáð.	Eyjólfur dáðaskáld (ON)
	<i>Band.</i> <i>Bandadrápa</i>
Eskál.	Einarr skálaglamm Helgason (ON)
	<i>Vell.</i> <i>Vellekla</i>
	<i>Laus.</i> <i>Lausavísur</i>
Eyv.	Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson (ON)
	<i>Hák.</i> <i>Hákonarmál</i>
	<i>Laus.</i> <i>Lausavísur</i>
<i>Fates</i>	<i>Fates of the Apostles (OE)</i>
<i>Finnsburh</i>	<i>Finnsburh Fragment (OE)</i>
Glúmr.	Glúmr Geirason (ON)
	<i>Grá.</i> <i>Gráfeldardrápa</i>
Gsind.	Guthormr sindri (ON)
	<i>Hák.</i> <i>Hákonarmál</i>
Hallv.	Hallvarðr háreksblesi (ON)
	<i>Knúts.</i> <i>Knútsdrápa</i>

Abbreviations

Hfr.	Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson (ON)
EÓT.	<i>Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar</i>
Laus.	<i>Lausavísur</i>
Hharð.	Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson (ON)
Laus.	<i>Lausavísur</i>
Hókr.	Halldórr ókristni (ON)
Eirfl.	<i>Eiríksflokkur</i>
Jór.	Jórunn skáldmær (ON)
Send.	<i>Sendibítr</i>
Liðs.	<i>Liðsmannaflokkur</i> (ON)
Maldon	<i>The Battle of Maldon</i> (OE)
Mgóð.	Magnús inn góði Ólafsson (ON)
Laus.	<i>Lausavísur</i>
Ótt.	Óttar svarti (ON)
Høf.	<i>Høfuðlausn</i>
Sigv.	Sigvatr Þórðarson (ON)
EÖH.	<i>Erfidrápa Óláfs helga</i>
Laus.	<i>Lausavísur</i>
Nes.	<i>Nesjavísur</i>
Vik.	<i>Vikingsavísur</i>
Skúli.	Skúli Þorsteinsson (ON)
Svø.	<i>Poem about Svøldr</i>
Steinn.	Steinn Herdísarson (ON)
Niz.	<i>Nizarvísur</i>
Ól.	<i>Óláfsdrápa</i>
Tindr.	Tindr Hallkelsson (ON)
Hák.	<i>Hákonardrápa</i>
Vígf.	Vígfúss Víga-Glúmsson (ON)
Hák.	<i>Poem about Hákon jarl</i>
Laus.	<i>Laus. Lausavísur</i>
Þfagr.	Þorleikr fagri (ON)
Flokk.	<i>Flokkur about Sveinn Úlfsson</i>
Þfisk.	Þorgils fiskimaðr (ON)
Laus.	<i>Lausavísur</i>
Þhorn.	Þorbjörn hornklofi (ON)
Har.	<i>Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)</i>
Þjóð.	Þjóðólfr ór Hvini (ON)
Har.	<i>Poem about Haraldr hárfagri</i>
ÞjóðA.	Þjóðólfr Arnórsson (ON)
Frag.	<i>Fragment</i>
Mag.	<i>Magnússflokkur</i>
Sex.	<i>Sexstefja</i>
Þjsk.	Þorleifr jarlsskáld Rauðfeldarson (ON)
Hák.	<i>Poem about Hákon</i>

Abbreviations

ÞKolb.	Þórður Kolbeinsson (ON)
Eir.	<i>Eiríksdrápa</i>
Þloft.	Þórarinn loftunga (ON)
Tøg.	<i>Tøgdrápa</i>

Introduction

Swords in Mind

Every culture that has made and used swords has viewed them as extraordinary objects. They feature prominently in the history, cosmology and mythology of communities across the globe, from Africa to northern Europe, from East Asia to the Indian sub-continent. Their appeal is not solely attributable to humanity's timeless fascination with death. This is clear from the spectrum of meanings attached to swords across time and space, encompassing power, wisdom, joy, protection – and fear. The interest has not faded from the mind today, long after these weapons were in general use on the battlefield. Swords are everywhere in modern popular culture, serving the plots of books, graphic novels, computer games, television and films – including some of the most successful ever made.¹ Countless websites and internet forums discuss them online. They have been the subject of museum exhibitions and galleries, and even have entire museums devoted to them.²

In Britain, the significance of swords has ancient roots. Here, the earliest bladed artefacts interpretable as swords emerged in the Bronze Age during the second millennium BCE. Most derive from ritually-charged contexts:³ a pattern that continued into the Early Middle Ages when swords were

¹ In western popular culture alone, Narsil and Sting in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (and Peter Jackson's subsequent film trilogy); the lightsabres of *Star Wars*; the Atlantean sword of Robert E. Howard's fantasy hero Conan, immortalised on screen by Arnold Schwarzenegger; the sword Green Destiny which fuels the plot of Ang Lee's Oscar-winning *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; the Japanese *katana* forged by legendary sword-smith Hattori Hanzō in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* film series; and various named swords in the blockbuster book and television series *Game of Thrones*.

² Exhibitions in the UK: *Cutting Edge: Japanese Swords in the British Museum*, British Museum, London (2004–5); *The Noble Art of the Sword: Fashion and Fencing in Renaissance Europe*, The Wallace Collection, London (2012). On the Continent: *Beauty Forged in Steel: Japanese Swords from Polish Private Collections*, Manggha Muzeum Sztuki i Techniki Japońskiej, Kraków, Poland (2010); *Evangelion and Japanese Swords*, Japan Cultural Institute, Paris, France (2014); exhibition on Hungarian swords, Ministry of Defence Military History Institute and Museum, Budapest (2015); *Das Schwert: Gestalt und Gedanke*, Deutsches Klingenmuseum, Solingen, Germany (2015–16); *Cutting-Edge History*, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, the Netherlands (2016); *Faszination Schwert*, Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart, Germany (2018–19). A museum dedicated to Japanese swords exists in Sumida, Tokyo, Japan.

³ Pers. comm. Neil Wilkin, curator, British Museum.

placed in graves, bodies of water and hoards. In Anglo-Saxon England, swords are among the most complicated and decorative objects to survive, representing the union of many parts, materials, processes and craftspeople. That they were cherished and curated over time is plain not only from wear and repairs to their features, but also from their rarity as stray finds, suggesting that they were hardly ever lost, discarded or left behind. Despite these signs of social complexity, swords have been viewed primarily as elite status symbols. This is true of the early antiquarians who marvelled at the weapons they dug from graves, and it remains a feature of scholarship today. Only in recent years has research delved more deeply into the meanings of this particular weapon during this particular period, so that a more holistic understanding is finally nascent. One catalyst was the discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard in 2009, an unprecedented assemblage of early Anglo-Saxon metalwork uniquely dominated by sword fittings.⁴ Another is current research trajectories in material culture, which have generated valuable methodologies for exploring the dense meanings of objects and their place in the world. Approaches such as artefact biography, agency and materiality, together with more nuanced discussions of social identities, now permit a reappraisal of swords through early medieval eyes – or, at least, in ways that marginalise modern value judgments based on cost, aesthetics or traditional social associations. In the spirit of such enquiries, this book explores how two interrelated regions of northern Europe, Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia, perceived and experienced swords between the fifth and eleventh centuries.

Despite the glamour associated with Anglo-Saxon swords, they have been the subject of few specific studies. Hilda R. Ellis Davidson's *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* (1962) remains the sole monograph on the topic, although another by Paul Mortimer and Matt Bunker, covering the fifth to seventh centuries, is now forthcoming.⁵ Significant discussions have appeared instead as journal articles on particular finds or topics,⁶ or in

⁴ Chris Fern, Tania M. Dickinson and Leslie Webster, eds, *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure* (London, 2019).

⁵ Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature* (Oxford, 1962); Paul Mortimer and Matt Bunker, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: From the 5th to 7th Century* (Ely, forthcoming).

⁶ Key examples: J. W. Anstee and L. Biek, 'A Study of Pattern-Welding', *Medieval Archaeology* 5 (1961), pp. 71–93; Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson and Leslie Webster, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial at Coombe (Woodnesborough), Kent', *Medieval Archaeology* 11 (1967), pp. 1–41; Vera I. Evison, 'Sword Rings and Beads', *Archaeologia* 55 (1976), pp. 303–15; Brian Gilmour, 'Ethnic Identity and the Origins, Purpose and Occurrence of Pattern-Welded Swords in Sixth-Century Kent: The Case of the Saltwood Cemetery', *Intersections: The Archaeology and History of Christianity in England, 400–1200: Papers in Honour of Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle*, ed. Martin Henig and Nigel Ramsay, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 505 (Oxford, 2010), pp. 59–70; Janet Lang and Barry

thematic works on warfare,⁷ military⁸ and social organisation,⁹ gender,¹⁰ art,¹¹ literature,¹² mortuary archaeology,¹³ beliefs and ritual,¹⁴ and mate-

Ager, 'Swords of the Anglo-Saxon and Viking Periods in the British Museum: A Radiographic Study', *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford, 1989), pp. 85–122; Leslie Webster, 'Wundorsmīpa geweorc: A Mercian Sword-Pommel from the Beckley Area, Oxfordshire', *Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Art, Material Culture, Language and Literature of the Early Medieval World*, ed. Eric Cambridge and Jane Hawkes (Oxford, 2017), pp. 97–111; David M. Wilson, 'Some Neglected Late Anglo-Saxon Swords', *Medieval Archaeology* 9 (1965), pp. 32–54.

⁷ Peter Bone, 'The Development of Anglo-Saxon Swords from the Fifth to the Eleventh Century', *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford, 1989), pp. 63–70; Kelly DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066* (Woodbridge, 1999); Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450–900* (London, 2003); Paul Mortimer, *Woden's Warriors: Warfare, Beliefs, Arms and Armour in Northern Europe during the 6th–7th Centuries* (Ely, 2011); Ian P. Stephenson, *The Late Saxon Army* (Stroud, 2007); Richard Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons and Warfare* (Stroud, 2000).

⁸ Richard P. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Berkeley, CA, 1988); Nicholas P. Brooks, 'Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 59 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 81–103; Nicholas P. Brooks, *Communities and Warfare, 700–1400* (London, 2000); John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Gainesville, FL, 2000).

⁹ Jos Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy: Lords, Retainers and Their Relationship in Beowulf* (Amsterdam, 1999).

¹⁰ Dawn M. Hadley, 'Negotiating Gender, Family and Status in Anglo-Saxon Burial Practices, c. 600–950', *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 301–23; Nick Stoodley, *The Spindle and the Spear: A Critical Enquiry into the Construction and Meaning of Gender in the Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 288 (Oxford, 1999).

¹¹ Martin O. H. Carver, 'Contemporary Artefacts Illustrated in Late Saxon Manuscripts', *Archaeologia* 108 (1986), pp. 117–45; Catherine E. Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2004); Michael J. Lewis, 'The Bayeux Tapestry and Eleventh Century Material Culture', *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 179–94.

¹² Caroline Brady, '"Weapons" in Beowulf: An Analysis of the Nominal Compounds and an Evaluation of the Poet's Use of Them', *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979), pp. 79–142; Geoffrey Hughes, 'Beowulf, Unferth and Hrunting: An Interpretation', *English Studies* 58 (1977), pp. 385–95; Lewis E. Nicholson, 'Hunlafing and the Point of the Sword', *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, IN, 1975), pp. 50–61; Steven Walton, 'Words of Technological Virtue: The Battle of Brunanburh and Anglo-Saxon Sword Manufacture', *Technology and Culture* 36 (1995), pp. 987–99.

¹³ Helen Geake, *The Use of Grave Goods in Conversion-Period England, c. 600–850*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 261 (Oxford, 1997); Heinrich Härke, *Angelsächsische Waffengräber des 5. bis 7. Jahrhunderts* (Köln, 1992); Howard M. Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain* (Cambridge, 2006).

¹⁴ Julie Lund, 'At the Water's Edge', *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon*

rial culture.¹⁵ The result is an uneven body of research with certain issues explored in detail and others left undeveloped.¹⁶ Two distinct motifs have emerged: the sword's physical form and manufacture, and its broader social significance. Scholarship has drifted increasingly from the former towards the latter over the last hundred years.

Form and Manufacture

The earliest major sword studies were concerned with typology, sorting weapons into chronological types based on shared characteristics. Virtually all relate to Continental swords and focus on either the earlier (fifth to seventh centuries)¹⁷ or later (eighth to twelfth centuries) part of the period.¹⁸ Blades have received less attention than hilts, primar-

Paganism Revisited, ed. Martin O. H. Carver, Alexandra Sanmark and Sarah Semple (Oxford and Oakville, CT, 2010), pp. 49–66; Ben Raffield, '“A River of Knives and Swords”: Ritually Deposited Weapons in English Watercourses and Wetlands during the Viking Age', *European Journal of Archaeology* 17 (2014), pp. 634–55; Andrew Reynolds and Sarah Semple, 'Anglo-Saxon Non-Funerary Weapon Depositions', *Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology: Papers in Honour of Martin G. Welch*, ed. Stuart Brookes, Susan Harrington and Andrew Reynolds, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 527 (Oxford, 2011), pp. 40–8.

¹⁵ Esther A. Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards in England, AD 400–1100*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 310 (Oxford, 2000); Brian Gilmour, 'Swords, Seaxes and Saxons: Pattern-Welding and Edged Weapon Technology from Late Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England', *Collectanea Antiqua: Essays in Memory of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes*, ed. Martin Henig and Tyler Jo Smith, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1673 (Oxford, 2007), pp. 91–109; Ronald F. Tylecote and Brian J. Gilmour, *The Metallography of Early Ferrous Edge Tools and Edge Weapons*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 155 (Oxford, 1986); Alan Williams, *The Sword and the Crucible: A History of the Metallurgy of European Swords up to the 16th Century* (Leiden, 2012).

¹⁶ The Continental situation is different: many studies of swords exist and are relevant to Anglo-Saxon England. For comprehensive surveys, see Fedir Androshchuk, *Viking Swords: Swords and Social Aspects of Weaponry in Viking Age Societies* (Stockholm, 2014); and Ulrich Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klingen: Studien zu Konstruktion, Herstellung und Wertigkeit der frühmittelalterlichen Spatha in Westfalen* (Münster, 2016).

¹⁷ Elis Behmer, *Das Zweischneidige Schwert der Germanischen Völkerwanderungszeit* (Stockholm, 1939); Wilfried Menghin, *Das Schwert im frühen Mittelalter: chronologisch-typologische Untersuchung zu Langschwerten aus germanischen Gräbern des 5. bis 7. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*, Wissenschaftliche Beibände zum Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums Bd. 1 (Stuttgart, 1983).

¹⁸ Jan Petersen, *De Norske Vikingsverd: En Typologisk-kronologisk Studie over Vikingtidens Vaaben* (Kristiania, 1919); Alfred Geibig, *Beiträge zur morphologischen Entwicklung des Schwertes im Mittelalter: Eine Analyse des Fundmaterials vom ausgehenden 8. bis 12. Jahrhundert aus Sammlungen der BRD* (Neumünster, 1991);

ily because they underwent fewer morphological changes over time, although Lehmann's recent work offers a way forward by classifying them according to their more variable constructional features.¹⁹ No equivalent classification of Anglo-Saxon swords exists. Researchers have instead utilised the key Continental studies, which cover the broad types occurring in England;²⁰ but dating is a problem since types of sword found in Norway or Germany may appear in England, but not necessarily contemporaneously. Hines and Bayliss' framework for early Anglo-Saxon chronology has helped to mitigate the issue by including a scheme for swords that is calibrated chronologically to their occurrence in burials.²¹ Later swords would benefit from similar treatment.

The making of swords – the materials used, technologies deployed, location of workshops and distribution of the finished products – was another early focus for discussion. Blades formed the core of this research, especially their pattern-welding and inscription.²² Pattern-welding, in which twisted and folded iron rods were hammered and welded together to create a densely patterned blade, has been approached largely from a practical viewpoint: the number and arrangement of rods, the combination of twists, the patterns created and the finished blade's efficacy;²³ but more recent studies have explored the technique's social and symbolic significance.²⁴ The greatest advance has been made by three-dimensional X-ray computed tomography (CT), which has unveiled staggering new insights into the blades' intricacies and the boundless skill of smiths.²⁵ Blades inscribed with the name ULFBERHT, popular across northern and western Europe during the ninth to eleventh centuries, have been another research hotspot, with debate concentrating particularly on their place of origin.²⁶

Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klinge*, p. 19; Anne Pedersen, 'Viking Weaponry', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London, 2008), pp. 204–11.

¹⁹ Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klinge*, pp. 138–68 and 331–2.

²⁰ Abridgements of Behmer's and Petersen's typologies were devised respectively by R. Ewart Oakeshott, *The Archaeology of Weapons: Arms and Armour from Prehistory to the Age of Chivalry* (London, 1960), and Mortimer Wheeler, *London and the Vikings* (London, 1927), pp. 31ff.

²¹ Alex Bayliss, John Hines, Karen Høilund Nielsen, Gerry McCormac and Chris Scull, *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework* (London, 2013). The scheme is based largely upon Menghin's typology with one or two additions.

²² A. L. Lorange, *Den yngre jernalders svaerd* (Bergen, 1889); summarised in Androshchuk, *Viking Swords*, pp. 13–14.

²³ Lee A. Jones, 'Blade Construction and Pattern-Welding', *Swords of the Viking Age*, ed. R. Ewart Oakeshott and Ian G. Peirce (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 145–51; Anstee and Biek, 'Study of Pattern-Welding'; Lang and Ager, 'Swords'.

²⁴ Gilmour, 'Swords, Seaxes and Saxons'; Gilmour, 'Ethnic Identity'.

²⁵ Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klinge*.

²⁶ Anne Stalsberg, 'Herstellung und Verbreitung der Vlfberht-Schwertklingen:

Over time, interest has grown in how other sword parts were made. Cameron's work on Anglo-Saxon scabbards filled a significant lacuna, while Lehmann used CT to examine how scabbards and hilts were put together, revealing details invisible to the naked eye.²⁷ Lately, Blakelock's scientific analysis of gold hilt pieces from the Staffordshire Hoard found that goldsmiths deliberately depleted the amount of silver and copper in the metal's alloy in order to enrich the gold at surface level.²⁸ These studies have shown that blades were not the only parts of swords to be made with extraordinary skill and care, and signal that scientific analysis carries the greatest potential for enhancing knowledge of sword manufacture.

Social and Symbolic Significance

Scholars have always recognised that early medieval swords possessed a social and symbolic significance that transcended their use as weapons.²⁹ Indeed, a mounting interest in this aspect of swords has resulted in their military function increasingly taking the proverbial back seat.³⁰ Popular

eine Neubewertung', *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters* 36 (2008), pp. 89–118; Anne Stalsberg, 'Ulfberht Revisited: A Classification', *The Viking Age: Ireland and the West – Papers from the Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress, Cork, 18–27 August 2005*, ed. John Sheehan and Donnchadh Ó Corráin (Dublin, 2010), pp. 450–64; Anne Pedersen, 'Bridging the Distribution Gap: Inscribed Swords from Denmark', *ibid.*, pp. 309–21; Kasper Andresen, 'Dekor og Innskrift på Vikingsverd – Hvordan Ble De Utført?', *Spor: fortydsnytt fra midt-norge* 8 (1993), pp. 38–9; Alan Williams, 'A Metallurgical Study of Some Viking Swords', *Gladius* xxix (2009), pp. 121–84; Williams, *The Sword*, pp. 120–2.

²⁷ Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*; Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klingen*.

²⁸ Eleanor S. Blakelock, 'Never Judge a Gold Object by Its Surface Analysis: A Study of Surface Phenomena in a Selection of Gold Objects from the Staffordshire Hoard', *Archaeometry* 58 (2016), pp. 912–29. The techniques used were surface and sub-surface X-ray fluorescence (XRF) and scanning electron microscopy with energy-dispersive X-ray analysis (SEM-EDX).

²⁹ Ellis Davidson's book, the earliest major treatment of Anglo-Saxon swords, approaches them both as weapons and as symbols. This aspect has been discussed more fully for swords than for any other war-gear, reflecting an academic bias towards this weapon; but the situation is changing following recent work on shields (Tania M. Dickinson, 'Symbols of Protection: The Significance of Animal Ornamented Shields in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Archaeology* 49 (2005), pp. 109–64; Tania M. Dickinson and Heinrich Härke, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Shields', *Archaeologia* 110 (1992), pp. 1–94), spears (Andrew Welton, 'Encounters with Iron: An Archaeometallurgical Reassessment of Early Anglo-Saxon Spearheads and Knives', *Archaeological Journal* 173 (2016), pp. 206–44) and helmets (Neil Price and Paul Mortimer, 'An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo', *European Journal of Archaeology* 17 (2014), pp. 517–38).

³⁰ Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*; Svante Fischer, *Les Seigneurs des Anneaux: Inscriptions Runiques des France*, Bulletin de liaison de l'AFAM, Hors ser. 2 (Condé-sur-Noireau, 2007); Androshchuk, *Viking Swords*; Lech Marek, *Early Medieval Swords from Central and Eastern Europe: Dilemma of an Archaeologist and a Student of Arms*

lines of enquiry have revolved around the sword's role in identity, ritual behaviour and social relationships.

A perennial theme in archaeological research is the relationship between artefacts and the identities of those who made, used, owned and encountered them. Over time, objects have come to be seen less as passive reflections of an individual's identity in life and more as active tools in its creation and maintenance.³¹ Early medieval swords have been equated traditionally with elite identity due to their material value and rarity (with regional exceptions) in the archaeological record;³² but now, high status is viewed as just one aspect of a sword's meaning. Researchers accept that the number of swords recovered from Anglo-Saxon graves does not reflect the number in circulation,³³ implying that sword ownership was not exclusive to elites but was more widespread, albeit probably socially 'graded' – supported by the range of materials used to make sword furniture, from horn and antler to precious metals. Loveluck's regional study of sword burials adds a further nuance, querying if swords buried in Kent, where they were moderately common, carried fewer elite undertones than those north of the Wash, where they were more unusual.³⁴ These ideas test the established wisdom that swords were elite symbols because they were rare, recasting this view as a modern value judgement that was not necessarily shared in the early medieval past.³⁵

(Wrocław, 2005); Mikael Jakobsson, *Krigarideologi och Vikingatida Svärdstypologi* (Stockholm, 1992); Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klinge*, pp. 313–29.

³¹ Matthew Johnson, *Archaeological Theory* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 98–115.

³² Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*, pp. 9–10; Williams, 'Metallurgical Study', pp. 105ff; Jakobsson, *Krigarideologi*, especially pp. 79–104 and 181; Kelly DeVries and Robert D. Smith, *Medieval Weapons: An Illustrated History of Their Impact* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2007), pp. 30–1; Webster, 'Wundorsmiþa geweorc', p. 105. Based upon the frequency of swords in early Anglo-Saxon burials, John Hines ('Matters of Material and Social Significance: The Staffordshire Hoard in Its Archaeological Context', *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure*, ed. Chris Fern, Tania M. Dickinson and Leslie Webster (London, 2019) has estimated that up to one in four freemen in south-eastern England owned a sword, and around one in ten elsewhere.

³³ Mortimer, *Woden's Warriors*, p. 109; Dawn M. Hadley, 'Masculinity', *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies*, ed. Jacqueline Stodnick and Renee R. Trilling (Chichester, 2012), pp. 115–32 at pp. 127–8; Zoe Devlin, 'Social Memory, Material Culture and Community Identity in Early Medieval Mortuary Practice', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 14 (2007), pp. 38–46 at pp. 41–3; Bonnie Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2003), p. 93; Frans Theuws and Monica Alkemade, "'A Kind of Mirror for Men": Sword Depositions in Late Antique Gaul', *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Frans Theuws and Janet L. Nelson (Leiden, 2000), pp. 401–76 at p. 464; Geake, *Use of Grave Goods*, p. 72.

³⁴ Christopher Loveluck, *Northwest Europe in the Early Middle Ages, c. AD 600–1150: A Comparative Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 101–2.

³⁵ Mortimer (*Woden's Warriors*, p. 109) has painted the most radical picture of sword ownership, arguing that swords were so desirable that most early Anglo-

Swords have featured regularly in studies of gender identity since the later twentieth century. The prevailing view has been that swords encapsulated early medieval masculinity: unsurprising, since warfare and the wielding of weapons has been perceived historically as a male pursuit in early medieval society.³⁶ Increasingly, however, researchers are confronting – and being confronted by – the relationship between women and swords. This forms a strand in a broader debate surrounding the identification of individuals buried with weapons in early medieval graves as ‘warriors’.³⁷ Härke’s influential work over the past generation has disrupted the link between weapons and warriors,³⁸ but to some extent his and subsequent studies on the theme have built their arguments upon a narrow, conspicuously modern, definition of a ‘warrior’ as an adult male who participated in fighting and probably had the pathology to prove it.³⁹ More nuanced approaches have since articulated that in a violent

Saxon warriors, regardless of status, would have found a way to own one. He supports his view by invoking the Roman army’s ability to equip entire legions with swords: perhaps a problematic comparison (which Mortimer himself acknowledges), given the differences between Roman and early Anglo-Saxon military organisation, funding and tactics.

³⁶ Stoodley, *The Spindle*, pp. 30, 35, 44 and 74; Dickinson, ‘Symbols of Protection’, pp. 110 and 161; Hadley, ‘Negotiating Gender’; Dawn M. Hadley, ‘Warriors, Heroes and Companions: Negotiating Masculinity in Viking-Age England’, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 15 (2006), pp. 270–84. The Freudian characterisation of swords as phalluses (Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. A. A. Brill (Mineola, NY, 2003), p. 132) has influenced corners of scholarship on Anglo-Saxon literature and art – if not always convincingly. See especially Madeleine H. Caviness, ‘Obscenity and Alterity: Images That Shock and Offend Us/Them, Now/Then?’, *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski (Leiden, 1998), pp. 155–75 at p. 169, cf. Karkov, *Ruler Portraits*, p. 170, n. 78; and also Dana M. Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 97–101, cf. Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 198. These examples are discussed fully in Sue Brunning, ‘The “Living” Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe, AD 500–1100: An Interdisciplinary Study’, PhD thesis, Institute of Archaeology, University College London (2013), pp. 33–4.

³⁷ For a recent summary, see Laura M. Whitehouse, ‘The Weapons Make the Man? A Re-analysis of Early Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial and Interpretation’, *Archaeologies of Gender and Violence*, ed. Uroš Matić and Bo Jensen (Oxbow, 2017), pp. 223–46.

³⁸ Heinrich Härke, ‘Early Saxon Weapon-Burials: Frequencies, Distributions and Weapon Combinations’, *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford, 1989), pp. 49–61; Heinrich Härke, ‘“Warrior Graves”? The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite’, *Past and Present* 126 (1990), pp. 22–43; Heinrich Härke, ‘Changing Symbols in a Changing Society: The Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite in the Seventh Century’, *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. Martin O. H. Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 149–65; Heinrich Härke, ‘Swords, Warrior-Graves and Anglo-Saxon Warfare’, *Current Archaeology* 16 (2004), pp. 556–61.

³⁹ Härke, ‘“Warrior Graves”?’, pp. 33–7; Whitehouse, ‘The Weapons’.

society like the early medieval North, weapons became symbols not only of warriorhood but of power: a reading that unlocks their relevance to other social groups and enables a reassessment of individuals previously rejected as 'warriors' because modern scholars have viewed them as too frail, young, old or female to be so.⁴⁰

The biological sexing of individuals buried in Anglo-Saxon graves via osteoarchaeological methods has discredited the traditional approach of sexing by grave goods (weapons for a man, jewellery for a woman) by revealing a number of 'cross-gendered' burials, in which female skeletons are accompanied by conventionally 'male' accoutrements and vice versa. The few confirmed cases of women buried with swords have been met with scepticism, the sword seen as a male relative's heirloom, the grave as disturbed or the skeleton as improperly sexed;⁴¹ but overall, scientific data confirm the exceptionality of female weapon burials in England – at least, for now. Genomic analysis has now identified an individual buried at Birka, eastern Sweden, as female despite the 'male' flavour of her grave goods, including a sword (see pp. 108–9 and 147).⁴² The discovery, though contentious, carries significant implications for unpicking not only the complexities of feminine relationships with swords, but also those of 'warrior' identity, in ways that reach beyond the gender debate.⁴³

The fact that most intact Anglo-Saxon swords derive from burials (in the early period) or watery settings (in the later) has fuelled discussion of their ritual significance. Despite a consensus that not all swords were buried with their owners, opinion divides on the reasons why. Some have suggested, prosaically, that swords were buried only when the deceased lacked a male heir, or when a sword had become worn out.⁴⁴ Others have proposed more symbolic motivations, for instance if the memories imbuing a sword made it suitable (or not) for a particular grave, or if an

⁴⁰ Jakobsson, *Krigarideologi*, pp. 18–21, 79–104 and 179–80; Stephen H. Harrison, "'Warrior Graves"? The Weapon Burial Rite in Viking Age Britain and Ireland', *Maritime Societies of the Viking and Medieval World*, ed. James H. Barrett and Sarah Jane Gibbon (Leeds, 2015), pp. 299–319.

⁴¹ Stoodley, *The Spindle*, pp. 19–30; Whitehouse, 'The Weapons', pp. 225–9; Vera I. Evison, *Dover: The Buckland Anglo-Saxon Cemetery* (London, 1987), p. 126; Geake, *Use of Grave Goods*, pp. 60 and 70; Härke, "'Warrior Graves"?', p. 35.

⁴² Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Anna Kjellström, Torun Zachrisson et al., 'A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (2017), pp. 1–8.

⁴³ A useful discussion of the 'warrior women' issue as it stood before the Birka discovery is provided by Leszek Gardela, "'Warrior-Women" in Viking Age Scandinavia? A Preliminary Archaeological Study', *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoiviensia* 8 (2013), pp. 273–309; see also Deborah Shepherd, 'The Elusive Warrior-Maiden Tradition: Bearing Weapons in Anglo-Saxon Society', *Ancient Warfare: Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. John Carman and Anthony Harding (Stroud, 1999), pp. 219–43.

⁴⁴ Geake, *Use of Grave Goods*, p. 72; Mortimer, *Woden's Warriors*, p. 110; Hadley, 'Masculinity', p. 127.

individual had earned the rare honour of sword burial.⁴⁵ Theuws and Alkemade read Merovingian sword burial in socio-political terms as a community's creation of a 'founding ancestor' who would protect their land with the sword placed in his grave.⁴⁶ The reasons why mourners chose to bury or re-circulate a dead person's sword would repay deeper thought, perhaps synchronising with the role of swords as gifts or heir-looms where there was a concern to maintain familial and political ties (see pp. 11–12 and 125–7).

Scholars largely concur that the presence of swords in watery contexts is best explained as the result of deliberate, ritualised behaviour.⁴⁷ Lund argued that lakes and rivers were liminal zones where swords with chequered pasts could be disposed of safely, reducing the risk of their negative power blighting the surrounding community.⁴⁸ Raffield saw the growth in weapon deposition in Viking-period England as a response to the cultural and political ruptures of the age, in some cases representing sacrifices intended to secure divine aid.⁴⁹ A ritual phenomenon which Anglo-Saxon researchers have yet to explore in detail is the deliberate damaging of swords before deposition, something widely discussed by prehistorians and Scandinavian early medievalists. This topic has grown more relevant with the discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard, which could represent the ritual destruction of battle spoils (see pp. 86–8).⁵⁰ It also furnished a new ritual context for Anglo-Saxon swords: hoards. The inclusion of sword parts in hoarded assemblages was unknown archaeologically before Staffordshire's arrival in 2009 but has since been repeated

⁴⁵ Mortimer, *Woden's Warriors*, p. 110; Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology*, p. 93.

⁴⁶ Theuws and Alkemade, "'A Kind of Mirror'", pp. 454–5 and 466; see also Geake, *Use of Grave Goods*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Julie Lund, 'Thresholds and Passages: The Meanings of Bridges in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005), pp. 109–35; Lund, 'At the Water's Edge'; Raffield, "'River of Knives'"; see also Richard Watson, 'Viking Age River Offerings in the British Isles', unpublished MA thesis, University of York (1995). For depositions beyond graves and watery contexts, see Sarah Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England: Religion, Ritual, and Rulership in the Landscape* (Oxford, 2013), p. 78, on a small number of swords discovered in prehistoric burial mounds.

⁴⁸ Lund, 'At the Water's Edge'; see also Reynolds and Semple, 'Anglo-Saxon Non-Funerary', p. 46.

⁴⁹ Raffield, "'River of Knives'", p. 648.

⁵⁰ Sue Brunning, 'Crossing Edges: "Person-like" Swords in Anglo-Saxon England', *Life on the Edge: Social, Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Celia Orsini and Sarah Semple (Hanover, 2017), pp. 409–18; Hines, 'Matters of Material'. For Scandinavian material, see Anders Andrén, 'A World of Stone: Warrior Culture, Hybridity and Old Norse Cosmology', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions – An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3–7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund, 2006), pp. 33–8 at pp. 34–5.

in a ninth-century hoard from Bedale, North Yorkshire, prompting fresh discussions about the meaning of these weapons in Anglo-Saxon society.⁵¹

A lively area of debate has been the role swords played in social and political relationships. Studies of lordship in Old English literature have highlighted episodes in which leaders reward their followers with the gift of a sword, thereby elevating the recipient and securing their loyalty.⁵² Archaeologists have linked a specific type of sword to these transactions. Ring-swords, used in England, Scandinavia and parts of the Continent during the sixth to eighth centuries, derive their name from interlocking ring fittings attached to their hilts. The rings are interpreted as symbolic rather than practical or decorative, and the prevailing view is that they recorded an oath of service sworn by a retainer to a lord.⁵³ They have also been cast as symbols of rank, specifically the rank(s) below lordship since the wealthiest Anglo-Saxon burials at Sutton Hoo (Suffolk), Taplow (Buckinghamshire) and Prittlewell (Essex) did not contain ring-swords:⁵⁴ in other words, they commemorated the givers, not receivers, of rings. These readings have stood the test of time but several wrinkles have yet to be ironed out: what do the double-ring fittings on pommels in the Staffordshire Hoard signify?⁵⁵ How do we explain the presence of ring- and non-ring-swords in the same grave?⁵⁶ And what might sword rings on other artefacts, including the Sutton Hoo shield and a drinking horn from Valsgärde in Sweden, mean?

⁵¹ Sue Brunning, 'The Sword Hilt Fittings', *The Vale of York Hoard*, ed. Gareth Williams and Barry Ager (London, forthcoming).

⁵² Bazelmans, *By Weapons*; Hill, *Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*.

⁵³ See Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, p. 25, for a summary of the debate. Björn Ambrosiani, 'Regalia and Symbols in the Boat-Graves', *Vendel Period Studies: Transactions of the Boat-Grave Symposium in Stockholm, February 2–3 1981*, ed. Jan Peder Lamm and Hans Åke Nordström (Stockholm, 1983), pp. 23–9; Bone, 'The Development', pp. 64–5; Oakeshott, *Archaeology of Weapons*, p. 102; Heiko Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert: Prunkbewaffnung und Rangabzeichen germanischer Krieger – eine Übersicht', *Studien zur Sachsenforschung* 6 (1987), pp. 189–236 at pp. 203–5; Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, pp. 57–8; Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*, pp. 76–7. Mortimer offers a counter view in which rings symbolise an oath sworn to the gods, added to a sword when pledged and removed when completed (*Woden's Warriors*, p. 99).

⁵⁴ Vera I. Evison, 'The Dover Ring-Sword and Other Sword-Rings and Beads', *Archaeologia* 101 (1967), pp. 63–118 at p. 63; Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert', p. 222; Bergljot Solberg, 'Weapons', *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Philip Pulsiano (London, 1995), pp. 718–20 at p. 719; Underwood (*Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, pp. 57–8) takes the middle ground, proposing that ring-swords were wielded either by the giver or receiver of oaths; Mortimer has suggested battlefield leader.

⁵⁵ Fern et al., *Staffordshire Hoard*, cat. nos. 75–7.

⁵⁶ Hjalmar Stolpe and Ture Algot Arne, *La Nécropole de Vendel* (Stockholm, 1927), pp. 10–11; Greta Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7* (Uppsala, 1977), pp. 12–15.

Debates about the circulation of swords in society weave into others about heirlooms, a topic with anthropological roots that has greatly influenced early medieval studies.⁵⁷ Archaeological excavations have recovered numerous worn and mended swords that clearly passed through several owners during their lives. Researchers have argued that these were not decrepit relics that had been effectively binned in a grave, but were cherished repositories of memories, experiences and relationships.⁵⁸ Some have remarked upon the esteem given to old swords in poetry,⁵⁹ while others have pondered their presence in Anglo-Saxon art (see pp. 30–5).⁶⁰ Views of old swords have been shaped by theoretical trends in archaeology, crucially artefact biography, which sees the history of an artefact – the circumstances of its manufacture, ownership, circulation, use, modification and ultimate deposition or destruction – as vital to its meaning.⁶¹ Researchers approaching swords from this perspective have shown how a weapon's past inspired how it was perceived and treated, with the memories of former associations enhancing the status of both

⁵⁷ Katina T. Lillios, 'Objects of Memory: The Ethnography and Archaeology of Heirlooms', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 6 (1999), pp. 235–62.

⁵⁸ Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klängen*, p. 255; Heinrich Härke, 'The Circulation of Weapons in Anglo-Saxon Society', *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Frans Theuws and Janet L. Nelson (Leiden, 2000), pp. 377–99; Barry Ager, 'Swords', *Saltwood Funerary Landscape: Early Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, ed. Barry Ager, Esther A. Cameron, Stephanie Spain and Ian Riddler, unpublished site report, CTRL Integrated Site Report Series (2006), pp. 1–10; Bazelmans, *By Weapons*, pp. 155–6 and 174–5; Bone, 'The Development', p. 63; Oakeshott and Peirce, *Swords*, pp. 2–3; Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert', pp. 222–6; Barry Ager and Brian Gilmour, 'A Pattern-Welded Anglo-Saxon Sword from Acklam Wold, North Yorkshire', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 60 (1988), pp. 13–23 at pp. 19–20; Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*, pp. 75–6; B. J. N. Edwards, 'A Viking Scabbard Chape from Chatburn, Lancashire', *Antiquaries Journal* 82 (2002), pp. 321–8 at pp. 326–7; Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, 'A Group of Viking Sword Chapes Reflecting the Political Geography of the Time', *Journal of Nordic Archaeological Science* 13 (2002), pp. 103–12 at pp. 108–9. Cf. Ellis Davidson's reading of an old, repaired sword in a Valsgärde burial as 'the rather mean policy of one family' (*The Sword*, p. 13, cf. pp. 144–5 and 171–5).

⁵⁹ Brady, "'Weapons' in *Beowulf*", pp. 90–1.

⁶⁰ Carver, 'Contemporary Artefacts', pp. 117–18 and 129; Michael J. Lewis, *The Archaeological Authority of the Bayeux Tapestry*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 404 (Oxford, 2005), pp. 51–6.

⁶¹ Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 'The Cultural Biography of Objects', *World Archaeology* 31 (1999), pp. 169–78; Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 41–3; Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (New York and London, 1998), p. 7; Carl Knappett, 'Photographs, Skeuomorphs and Marionettes: Some Thoughts on Mind, Agency and Objects', *Journal of Material Culture* 7 (2002), pp. 97–117; Lillios, 'Objects of Memory', pp. 235–62; Hadley, 'Masculinity', p. 117; Williams, *Death and Memory*, p. 59; Howard M. Williams, 'Introduction: Themes in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Death and Burial', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 14 (2007), pp. 1–11 at p. 5.

owner and sword.⁶² Also influential are theoretical frameworks that present artefacts as active participants in the world, imbued with agency that enables them not only to alter their own meaning but also even to manipulate human behaviour.⁶³ These ideas underpin more unusual arguments that swords may, on occasion, have been viewed as 'living' beings. The notion has been addressed primarily through literature, with experts remarking that swords, more than any other artefact, are anthropomorphised with distinctive characters, behaviours and personal acquaintances. Brady's study of *Beowulf* found that the poet's application of the Old English word *guðwine*, 'friend in war', to the sword Hrunting is the only known use of 'friend' for an inanimate object in Old English literature.⁶⁴ In a similar vein, Cherniss remarked that the word *dom* is used to describe the type of glory won both by Hrunting and human warriors in the poem, going on to argue that Old English verse depicts swords as like human retainers whose lords enriched them with treasure.⁶⁵

Some researchers have presumed that these literary 'living' swords existed in reality, accepting that true swords, like their poetic counterparts, bore names.⁶⁶ Proof has been sought particularly in runic inscriptions on

⁶² Reynolds and Semple, 'Anglo-Saxon Non-Funerary', p. 42; Lehmann, *Wurm bunte Klingen*, p. 324; see also Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, p. 26.

⁶³ Johnson, *Archaeological Theory*; Alfred Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford, 1992), pp. 40–66; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 68–71; Hadley, 'Masculinity', p. 117.

⁶⁴ Caroline Brady, '"Warriors" in *Beowulf*: An Analysis of the Nominal Compounds and an Evaluation of the Poet's Use of Them', *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1983), pp. 199–246 at pp. 104–5, n. 4; also Michael D. Cherniss, 'The Cross as Christ's Weapon: The Influence of Heroic Literary Tradition on *The Dream of the Rood*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973), pp. 241–52 at pp. 244–5; Brady, '"Weapons" in *Beowulf*', pp. 103–4; Guy Halsall, 'Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare and Society: The Ritual War in Anglo-Saxon England', *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford, 1989), pp. 155–77 at pp. 171–2; Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala, 2002), pp. 356–7.

⁶⁵ Cherniss, 'The Cross', pp. 245–7.

⁶⁶ A. Margaret Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga*', *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium*, ed. Edgar Charles Polomé (Austin, TX, 1969), pp. 130–99 at p. 139; Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*, p. 75; DeVries, *Norwegian Invasion*, p. 195; Paddy Griffith, *The Viking Art of War* (London, 1995), p. 173; Haakon Shetelig and Hjalmar Falk, *Scandinavian Archaeology* (Oxford, 1937), p. 382; Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*, pp. 98–103; Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (London, 1970), pp. 272–4; Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, p. 54; A. G. Drachmann, 'On the Named Swords, Especially in the Icelandic Sagas', *Centaurus* 13 (1968), pp. 29–38 at pp. 30–5; Dean A. Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore, MD, 2002), pp. 207–8. See Hjalmar Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde* (Kristiania, 1914), pp. 47–64, for a collection of names.

sword fittings. One, from Chessell Down (Isle of Wight), has been transliterated into Old English as *æco soeri*, translated by some as ‘increaser/augmenter of pain’ – a fine name for a sword – but by others as ‘Acca/Acco [a personal name] invokes’ or simply ‘a sword’.⁶⁷ Another from Ash, Gilton (Kent) may say ‘Sigimer named the sword’, implying at least that the sword had a name; but this again is just one of several possible readings, all of which are undermined by the extremely worn state of the inscription.⁶⁸ A verified Anglo-Saxon sword name remains elusive; indeed Huther’s recent survey of sword names found little real-world evidence for the practice.⁶⁹ Questions remain: were real swords named at all, and if so, why were their names not inscribed upon them like their owners’ and makers’ names occasionally were? Was it due to cost or literacy? Did the name of a sword change between owners? Or was it simply an informal custom that did not require epigraphic commemoration?

The notion of ‘living’ swords has been taken in a more radical direction by proposals that weapons may have been thought capable of physical animation. Androshchuk speculated that animal motifs on swords imbued them with vigour and liveliness, while the present author explored the relationship between swords and snakes in the Viking period, querying whether they were not only made to resemble these creatures but also, in some contexts, were thought to *become* them. Gansum has gone furthest of all, suggesting that the use of animal (and potentially human) bone in iron and steel production imparted living qualities to the blade.⁷⁰ These boundary-pushing ideas reflect how far early medieval sword scholarship

⁶⁷ Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*, pp. 100ff; Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, p. 142; Mindy MacLeod and Bernard Mees, *Runic Amulets and Magic Objects* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 83; pers. comm. Gaby Waxenberger.

⁶⁸ Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*, p. 79; Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, p. 90; MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, p. 83; Sonia C. Hawkes and Robert I. Page, ‘Swords and Runes in South-East England’, *Antiquaries Journal* 47 (1967), pp. 1–26 at pp. 4–6; John Hines, ‘Grave Finds with Runic Inscriptions from Great Britain’, *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung: Abhandlungen des Vierten Internationalen Symposiums über Runen und Runeninschriften in Göttingen vom 4–9 August 1995*, ed. Klaus Düwel and Sean Nowak (Berlin, 1998), pp. 186–96; John Hines, ‘The Early Runic Inscriptions from Kent and the Problem of Legibility’, *Das fupark und seine einzelsprachlichen Weiterentwicklungen: Akten der Tagung in Eichstätt vom 20. bis 24. Juli 2003* (Berlin and New York, 2006), pp. 188–208 at pp. 193–7.

⁶⁹ Heinz Huther, ‘... das beste aller Schwerter’: *Schwertnamen in Mythos, Sage und Epos* (Wolnzach, 2014).

⁷⁰ Sue Brunning, ‘“(Swinger of) the Serpent of Wounds”: Swords and Snakes in the Viking Mind’, *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia*, ed. Michael D. J. Bintley and Thomas J. Williams (Woodbridge, 2015), pp. 53–72; Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klingen*, pp. 325–9; Terje Gansum, ‘Role the Bones: From Iron to Steel’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 37 (2004), pp. 41–57.

has travelled, from analysis of their form to their finer meaning in the world. This study aims to plough deeper into that emerging furrow.

This book explores how swords were perceived and experienced in early medieval northern Europe, focusing primarily on Anglo-Saxon England. Perceptions of swords emerge from how individuals treated these weapons: what they did with them, how they presented them, what they said about them and how they disposed of them. Human behaviour thus created histories and relationships for swords that are interpreted here by drawing on biographical approaches to material culture that have influenced archaeological research.⁷¹ While their combat function is not treated in detail, the experiential and symbolic connotations of fighting with swords are considered as a key influence upon perceptions. Indeed, the relationship between swords and warriors receives special scrutiny. The primacy of this link requires reassessment now that the definition of 'warrior' as a social identity has become so nebulous; and as a weapon made purely for warfare, swords offer a useful lens through which to examine early medieval warrior identity and how best to define it today.

The approach taken is multidisciplinary, encompassing images of swords, the archaeology of swords and literature about swords. While these sources do not overlap perfectly in their geographical and chronological coverage, it is argued here that genuine contemporary attitudes are likely to emerge where themes and ideas recur across different expressions of contemporary thought. Such correlations, as well as points of divergence, offer a deeper, more rounded glimpse into early medieval minds than a more limited study would provide.⁷²

The book approaches England with a strong comparative eye on Scandinavia.⁷³ Scholarship has long conflated these regions, linked as they are ancestrally by Germanic cultural roots, geographically by the North Sea and physically by their many interactions. Very often, evidence from

⁷¹ Chris Fowler, *The Archaeology of Personhood: An Anthropological Approach* (London, 2004), pp. 59–71; Gosden and Marshall, 'Cultural Biography'; Hallam and Hockey, *Death*, pp. 42–3; Hoskins, *Biographical Objects*, p. 7. The approach has been challenged in recent years: see Andrew Meirion Jones, Marta Díaz-Guardamino and Rachel J. Crellin, 'From Artefact Biographies to "Multiple Objects": A New Analysis of the Decorated Plaques of the Irish Sea Region', *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 49 (2016), pp. 113–33.

⁷² Michael D. J. Bintley, *Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2015), pp. 4–6; John Hines, 'Literary Sources and Archaeology', *Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. Helena Hamerow, David A. Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford, 2011), pp. 965–85 at p. 974; Martin O. H. Carver, 'Marriages of True Minds: Archaeology with Texts', *Archaeology: The Widening Debate*, ed. Barry Cunliffe, Wendy Davies and Colin Renfrew (Oxford, 2002), pp. 465–96 at pp. 466–73; John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (London, 2001).

⁷³ Scandinavian settlements beyond England in Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Man, the Baltic and Russia are not considered in detail here but offer clear potential for future study.

one region has been used to interpret issues in the other with the justification of *faute de mieux*, 'for want of something better'⁷⁴ – the prime example being the application of Icelandic saga to early Anglo-Saxon England.⁷⁵ The lack of critical rigour risks overplaying parallels and missing significant cultural distinctions. This study revisits the comparison between these connected but distinctive peoples, how far their attitudes were shared and where they differed. The broad temporal perspective, spanning the entire early medieval period from the fifth to eleventh centuries, was selected for curiosity's sake. Those living through this dynamic age, marked by immense social, political and religious change, would have experienced significant shifts in attitude towards the world around them as well as the things within it. Changes in how swords were made and treated hint that feelings towards them were far from static, and, as such, chronological developments are a necessary component of this enquiry.

The book is arranged by type of evidence, or mode of expression: imagery (Chapter 1), archaeology (Chapter 2) and text (Chapter 3). These rich and complex sources are typically studied by specialists in distinct disciplines using specific analytical and critical methods. The approach taken here enables the sources to be explored on their own terms and in proper context, thus acknowledging and working with their individual biases. Each chapter adopts a similar format. First, perceptions of swords are examined in a general way, covering themes such as how swords were viewed conceptually, the influence of their physical and visual qualities, their life histories and networks, and how these things contributed to their social and symbolic significance. The enquiry then pinpoints the relationship between swords and warriors, juxtaposing it with a group long placed at the opposite end of the social spectrum: women. Chronological and geographical comparisons round off each chapter. Arranging the book in this way also provides the necessary space for a detailed discussion of inter-source parallels (Chapter 4) – those fascinating interfaces where genuine early medieval thoughts might glimmer, and temporal and cultural distinctions may be found. The results of these discussions are fully rooted in what a sword *was*, conceptually, within early medieval minds: it *was* a weapon, it *was* wielded by warriors – but the nature of this reality is shown to be more fluid and complex than previously appreciated. Killing, the spilling of blood and the partnership of death between sword and wielder may have been the very thing that elevated swords into such powerful beings in early medieval thought.

It is hoped that this book will offer a holistic understanding of how those in Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia viewed swords, and why

⁷⁴ Lewis, *Archaeological Authority*, p. 42; Richard Hall, *Exploring the World of the Vikings* (London, 2007), p. 21; Halsall, *Warfare and Society*, pp. 9–10.

⁷⁵ Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*; Ian P. Stephenson, *The Anglo-Saxon Shield* (Stroud, 2002); Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons*.

Introduction

they felt the way that they did. It also hopes to inspire discussion of other weapons along similar lines: after all, swords can only be understood insofar as they related to other weapons in the early medieval panoply. One day the cognitive primacy of swords may be challenged – but, by way of a preview, that will not happen here.

1

Image

Hundreds of images of swords survive from Anglo-Saxon England. They adorn metalwork, stone sculpture, carvings, manuscripts, embroideries and coins, in both secular and religious contexts. They are valuable not only as contemporary illustrations of these weapons but also as informants on their social and cultural significance. For early medieval audiences immersed in this imagery, it functioned actively by conveying, creating and influencing ideas while also provoking physical and emotional responses.¹ Modern viewers, however, are so removed from the social, cognitive and visual contexts in which these images were made that their spectrum of meanings can be hard to reach. Experts in visual culture have risen to the challenge by developing approaches to recover some of those meanings. One is iconography, the study of the content and meaning of representational (as opposed to ornamental) art – making it ideal for analysing depictions of artefacts.² This chapter adopts a broadly iconographic approach to sword imagery, alongside a careful eye on context and contemporary artistic conventions. It uses a body of Anglo-Saxon and comparative Scandinavian images drawn from published and publicly accessible resources which, while not exhaustive, is large and diverse enough in medium, provenance and date to support meaningful analysis.³

The corpus contains several biases. First, a fraction of the early medieval artistic record survives today. Countless images were made upon perishable materials that seldom endure the centuries. Literary references to narrative embroideries hint that the Bayeux Tapestry and fragments from Milan in Italy and Oseberg and Överhögdal in Scandinavia were less rare than they seem today (Nos. 1–4), while accounts of paintings suggest

¹ Gell, 'Technology of Enchantment', pp. 40–66; Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 68–71; Richard J. Harrison, *Symbols and Warriors: Images of the European Bronze Age* (Bristol, 2004), pp. 3–5; Peter S. Wells, *Image and Response in Early Europe* (London, 2008).

² Lyvia Morgan, *The Miniature Wall-Paintings of Thera: A Study in Aegean Culture and Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 10–16.

³ Depictions of spears were also collected for comparative purposes, resulting in a corpus of 2,335 individual war-gear images, 632 of which are swords. The database is available on the Archaeology Data Service website at <https://doi.org/10.5284/1051621>, DOI 10.5284/1051621.

that some types of medium have failed to survive at all.⁴ Manuscripts exist in quantity but many have been lost over centuries of conflict and accident: the 1731 fire in the Cotton Library, which claimed a unique *Life* of King Alfred and singed the sole existing *Beowulf* manuscript, being a brutal example.⁵ Second, regional and temporal differences shape the image corpus. More depictions of swords survive from England than Scandinavia, on different media and at different times: stone sculpture was produced in England from the seventh century but in Scandinavia only on the Swedish island of Gotland before the tenth, while manuscripts were not made there at all during the period.⁶ Local variations exist too, with Sweden furnishing more images than anywhere else in Scandinavia. These challenges can be navigated by adopting a sensitive, contextual approach that minimises the risk of drawing false conclusions from patterns that may issue from these biases.

Perceptions of Swords in Early Medieval Art

The ways by which artists characterised swords offer glimpses of how these weapons were perceived. The detail and accuracy involved, the figures who wield them and how they are used articulate the artists' personal attitudes but also a broader range of ideas among the audiences that consumed their works.

Conceptualising Swords

Swords were composite items comprising a blade, hilt and scabbard with a sword-belt or harness for suspending from the body (Fig. 1). Artists represented these components with varying care and frequency, implying that some were considered more characteristic of swords than others. Several detailed scabbard images survive in Anglo-Saxon art. A sword-shaped shield ornament from Edix Hill, Cambridgeshire (No. 5) features a scabbard with mouth-band (a mount reinforcing the opening) and a

⁴ Charles Reginald Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective* (Manchester, 1982), pp. 134–7; B.-M. Näsström, 'Images of the Past: Motifs of Tapestries in the Viking Age', *Being Religious and Living through the Eyes: Studies in Religious Iconography and Iconology – A Celebratory Publication in Honour of Professor Jan Bergman*, ed. Peter Schalk and Michael Strausberg (Uppsala, 1998), pp. 267–79 at p. 267; Richard North, *The Haustlong of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir* (Enfield, 1997).

⁵ Colin G. C. Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, The Panizzi Lectures 1993 (London, 1994), pp. 38–9.

⁶ James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts* (London, 1980), pp. 140 and 152; Anna Nilsén, 'Art and Architecture', *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 521–49 at p. 531.

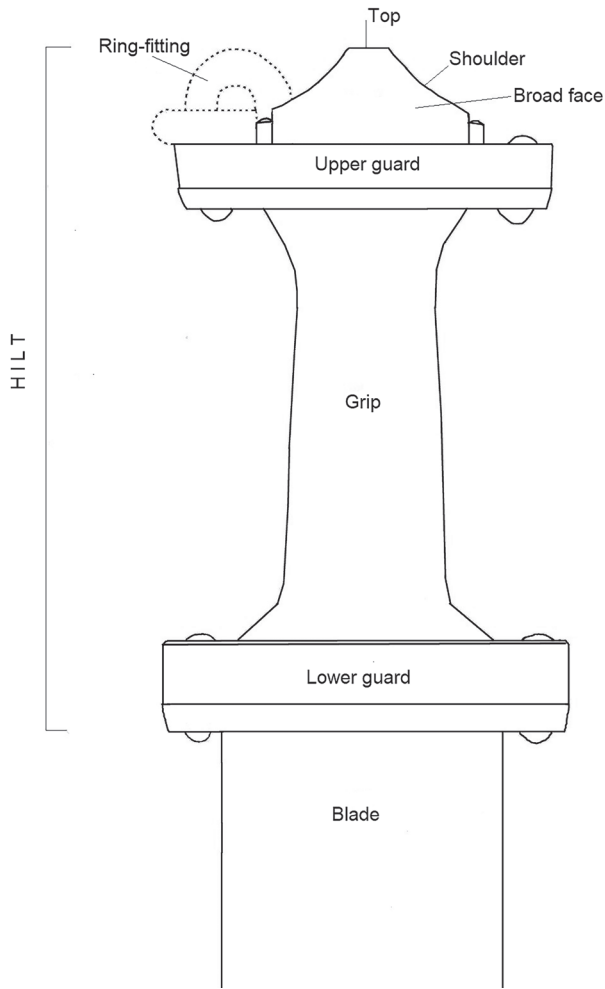


Fig. 1: Parts of an early medieval sword. © Sue Brunning

midline pattern perhaps denoting grooves, cords, bindings or braids found on archaeological examples.⁷ Later, on the Bayeux Tapestry, Harold Godwinson carries a sword in a scabbard with a mouth-band and sword-belt, complete with buckle and strap-end (Fig. 2). A Scandinavian example of carefully rendered scabbards appears on a helmet from grave XIV at Vendel (Uppland), Sweden (No. 6), furnished with mouth-bands, chapes (U-shaped fittings reinforcing the tip) and two bosses resembling those

⁷ Compare the criss-cross design on a scabbard from Brushfield, Derbyshire: Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*, pp. 35–6, 39–44 and fig. 12i.



Fig. 2: Sword with sword-belt, buckle and strap-end. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scenes 8–9 (No. 1). © With special permission from the city of Bayeux



Fig. 3: Warriors with sheathed swords. Helmet, boat grave XIV, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden (No. 6). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, perhaps for attaching the weapon to a belt (Fig. 3). In general, however, scabbards and sword-belts receive the least attention in art. Swords worn at their wielder's hips often appear to be attached by magic since no suspension method is depicted, while those brandishing swords do not always wear the corresponding scabbard, typified by the lid of the Franks Casket (No. 7) and throughout the Old English Hexateuch (No. 8). This phenomenon is matched in Scandinavia on a helmet from grave 7 at Valsgärde (Uppland), Sweden (No. 9),⁸ several picture-stones and runestones (Nos. 10–13) and the Oseberg embroideries.⁹ Some artists portray swords both with and without their scabbards in the same moment: folio 32v of the Harley Psalter (No. 14)

⁸ 'Blech E' in Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, Abb. 138.

⁹ Fragments 4 and 16 in Arne Emil Christensen and Margareta Nockert, *Osebergfunnet IV: Tekstilene* (Oslo, 2006), figs 1–22, 1–23, 1–25 and 1–26.

pictures two men sword-fighting but only one wears a scabbard,¹⁰ while on the Bayeux Tapestry a scene showing an infantryman with a scabbard is followed by another showing a cavalryman without one, even though his left hip, where the scabbard would have been fixed, is exposed by his raised shield.¹¹ Artists may have equipped individuals differently to personalise them or add rhythm to their images, but the trend may also reflect an attitude, real or iconographic, that scabbards were inessential to swords and could be treated superficially or omitted altogether.

Interestingly blades, surely the most essential part of a sword, are illustrated routinely as featureless strips with rounded or pointed ends – with impressive exceptions. Median lines along the centre of blades in many Anglo-Saxon manuscripts may signify fullers, longitudinal depressions that made blades lighter and more manoeuvrable.¹² One manuscript (No. 15) portrays an inscribed blade that replicates precisely archaeological examples from the ninth century onwards, down to the cross prefixing the lettering (Fig. 4; see p. 5).¹³ Pattern-welded blades do not seem to have been characterised in Anglo-Saxon art, but an early twentieth-century drawing of the Oseberg embroideries from Norway shows a figure wielding a blade with an intriguing cable-like design – although this detail is no longer visible on the original (Fig. 5).¹⁴

While artists seemed little concerned with characterising scabbards or the finer features of blades, they depicted hilts in conspicuous detail. Both straight and curved types of sword guard were portrayed, and some images strove for even greater accuracy. Horizontal lines across sword guards on the Sutton Hoo helmet, Torslunda *Pressblech* dies (Fig. 6) and a sword-shaped amulet from Eketorp, Sweden (No. 21) evoke the layered construction of contemporary sixth- and seventh-century guards, in which blocks of horn or wood were sandwiched between metal plates.¹⁵

¹⁰ Thomas H. Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination: Photographs of Sixteen Manuscripts with Descriptions and Index* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1992), pl. 2.57.

¹¹ Scenes 52–4 in David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 2nd edn (London, 2004).

¹² No. 14, fols 5 and 21: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pls 2.9 and 2.37; No. 16, fol. 93: Elzbieta Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts, 900–1066* (London, 1976), ill. 220. Tylecote and Gilmour, *Metallography*, pp. 209–13 and 247. Since fullers emerged in the eighth century, earlier depictions of lined blades on the Sutton Hoo helmet (No. 17), Swedish helmets from Uppland (No. 18: Greta Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 8* (Uppsala, 1954), Abb. 79), *Pressblech* dies from Torslunda, Sweden (No. 19: Rupert Leo Smith Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, Volume 2: Arms, Armour and Regalia* (London, 1978), figs 143–5) and a *goldgubbe* (impressed gold foil) from Sorte Muld, Denmark (No. 20) may have been intended to emphasise the blades' length or shape.

¹³ A second inscribed blade may appear in the Eadui Psalter (fol. 93), albeit less distinctive: Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, ill. 220.

¹⁴ Fragment 4 in Christensen and Nockert, *Osebergfunnet*.

¹⁵ Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, figs 140–2. Similar details on later sword-shaped amulets from Bejsebakken and Kalmergården, Denmark (Nos. 22–3) are less likely to represent layered guards, which had long been out of fashion.

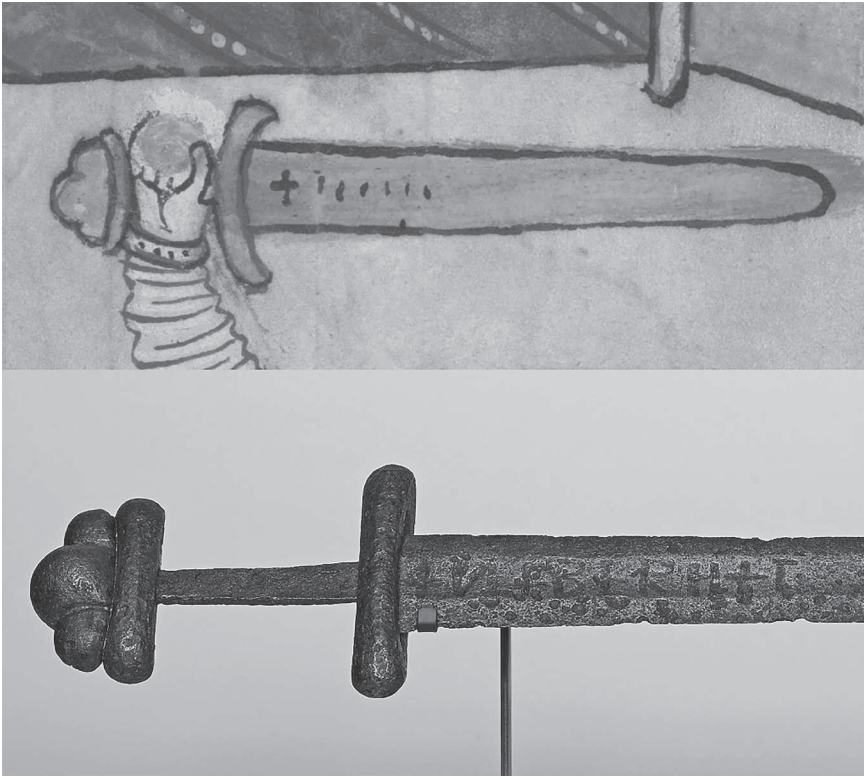


Fig. 4: ULFBERHT swords. (a) Sword of Orion. © The British Library Board, Cotton Tiberius B.V., fol. 39 (No. 15). (b) Sword from Norway. © The National Museum of Denmark, accession no. 780

Pommels are often so carefully rendered that they can be matched with archaeological types. Pyramidal pommels on the Sutton Hoo, Swedish and Torslunda helmet *Pressbleche* unquestionably show the contemporary ‘cocked-hat’ type, while tiny pommel circlets on the Vendel XIV helmet, a Torslunda die and a *guldgubbe* from Sorte Muld on Bornholm, Denmark identify them as ring-swords (see p. 11, 78–81, 117–18). Later pommel types known popularly as tri-lobed, ‘tea-cosy’ (hemispherical), ‘brazil-nut’ (elliptical) and disc are represented widely in Anglo-Saxon art, while the five-lobed pommel on the Bejsebakken amulet from Denmark echoes Petersen’s Type K sword.¹⁶ The fact that different pommel types co-exist in some images hints that artists not only recognised different sword types, but also used their hilts to differentiate them.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Archaeological Authority*, p. 47; Oakeshott and Peirce, *Swords*, pp. 63–4.



Fig. 5: Patterned sword. Embroidery fragment, ship burial, Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway (No. 2). © Kulturhistorisk Museum, Universitetet i Oslo



Fig. 6: Two warriors, ring-sword circled. *Pressblech* die, Torslunda, Öland, Sweden (No. 19). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

This survey suggests that swords were not seen as generic items but as distinctive individuals, recognised primarily by the features of their hilts. Details like fullers, pattern-welded blades, inscriptions and scabbard mounts may occur less often, or in less detail, because artists were less familiar with them: only those who knew what swords looked like up-close would have understood these features. Other artists may have considered them inessential, omissible without compromising their images' authenticity. Others still may have wished simply to avoid cluttering their images with excessive detail. The pervading impression is that swords were perceived primarily as 'blade-plus-hilt': to artists and viewers alike, these were the indispensable components of swords and neither could be left out if the artefact was to be recognised.

A broader iconographic survey reveals swords as the most meticulously illustrated weapon in the corpus. By contrast spears typically resemble a single line (for the shaft) topped with a barbed, leaf- or lozenge-shaped

motif (for the head). Finer features like spearhead sockets, midribs (central ridges) or decoration are routinely absent, meaning that attempts to match images with real spear types are less worthwhile.¹⁷ Exceptions occur on Swedish helmets from Vendel and Valsgärde, whose *Pressbleche* show finely-modelled spearheads with midribs, bosses and sockets mounted on robust shafts.¹⁸ Short horizontal lines beneath spearheads in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and a graffito on a strap-end from Birka, Sweden (No. 24) evoke 'lugs' or 'wings', bars of uncertain function on later spearheads; some with curling terminals recall a small group of surviving spears.¹⁹ The sketchier rendering of spears overall implies that they failed to engage artists and viewers as deeply as swords did, or even that they were felt to possess less character and individualism.

Some of the most accurate depictions of swords appear on artefacts linked to warriors or individuals invested in warrior culture. The Sutton Hoo and Swedish helmets *Pressbleche*, presumably made for warriors or those wishing to be seen as such, are the most meticulous of all, incorporating ring fittings, 'sandwich' guards, ridged hand-grips, scabbard mounts and sword-belts. The Old English Hexateuch's patron is unknown, but its attention to war-gear points towards a secular figure acquainted with military matters.²⁰ While some of its swords are hectically drawn (especially on the unfinished later folios), many are extraordinarily well-realised, especially those brandished by Abraham (Fig. 7), the Pharaoh and several kings.²¹ The kings' swords even have central protrusions on their lower guards, identifying them as Petersen's Type Z which was contemporary with the manuscript's production (Fig. 8).²² By contrast, imagery of war-gear made for ecclesiastical patrons can be noticeably less detailed in execution, with Hooper attributing the difference to the varying social concerns of these respective groups.²³ The Bayeux Tapestry's impressive

¹⁷ Signe Horn Fuglesang, *Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style: A Phase of 11th Century Scandinavian Art* (Odense, 1980), p. 139; James Mann, 'Arms and Armour', *The Bayeux Tapestry: A Comprehensive Survey*, ed. Frank Stenton (London, 1965), pp. 56–69 at pp. 66–7; cf. Michael J. Swanton, *The Spearheads of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (London, 1973), p. 4.

¹⁸ Stolpe and Arne, *La Nécropole*, pl. VI, figs 1, 7 and pl. XLI, fig. 4; Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 8*, Abb. 79; Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, Abb. 115.

¹⁹ Fuglesang, *Some Aspects*, pp. 136–40; Lewis, 'Bayeux Tapestry', pp. 192–3 and n. 42.

²⁰ Jennie Kiff, 'Images of War: Illustrations of Warfare in Early Eleventh-Century England', *Anglo-Norman Studies VII* (1984), pp. 177–94 at p. 188.

²¹ Fols 59, 24v and 58v: Benjamin C. Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch, Cotton Claudius B.iv: The Frontier of Seeing and Reading in Anglo-Saxon England* (London and Toronto, 2007), CD-ROM.

²² Petersen, *De Norske Vikingsverd*, pp. 175–7, figs 136–7.

²³ Jennie Hooper, 'The "Rows of the Battle-Swan": The Aftermath of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Art', *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Stamford, Lincs., 1998), pp. 82–99 at pp. 95–6.

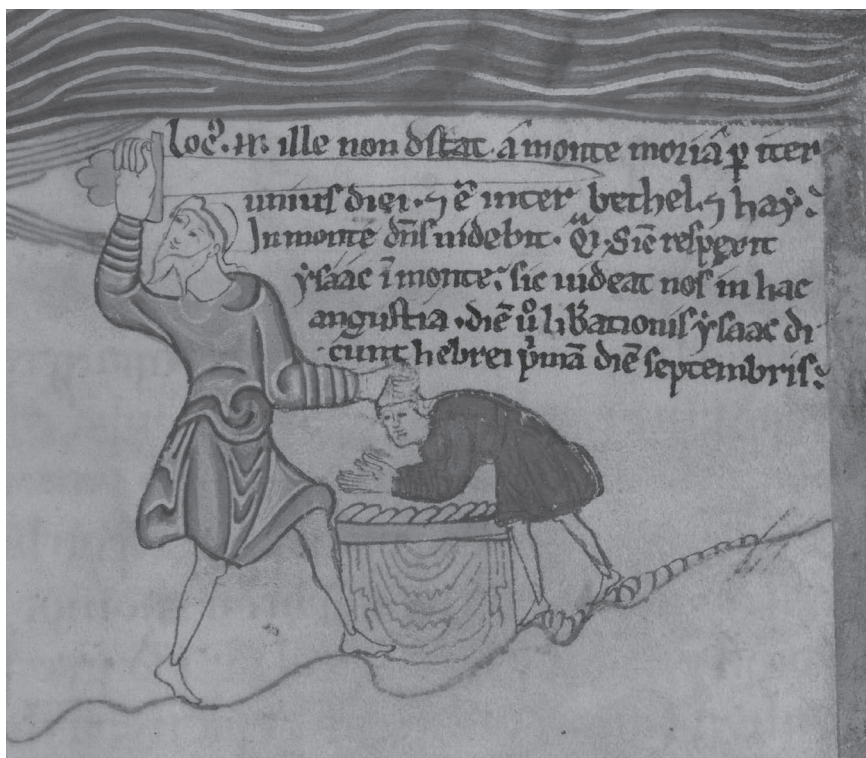


Fig. 7: Abraham sacrificing Isaac. © The British Library Board, Cotton Claudius B.IV, fol. 38 (No. 8)

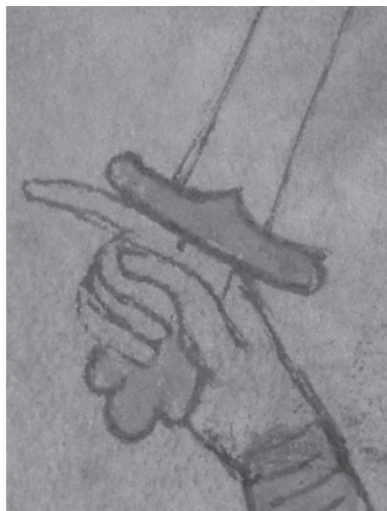
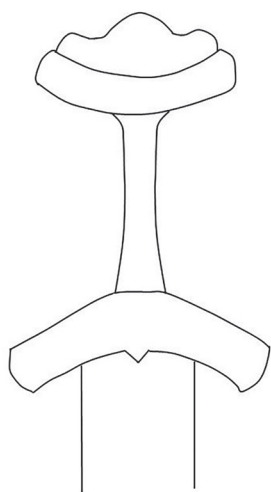


Fig. 8: Petersen Type Z swords. (a) © Sue Brunning. (b) © The British Library Board, Cotton Claudius B.IV, fol. 58v (No. 8)

war-gear seems to offer a counter view since its commissioner was probably Bishop Odo of Bayeux.²⁴ Certainly, clerics were not unacquainted with war-gear: Anglo-Saxon wills record that many owned weapons, albeit typically in their capacity as landowners obliged to furnish troops to their lord's army or a *heriot* of war-gear on their death.²⁵ Odo may have gone further. Using credible evidence, Nakashian is convinced that he (and other clerics) fought personally at Hastings, while textual references and ecclesiastical paraphernalia in the Staffordshire Hoard show that churchmen were, at the very least, present on Anglo-Saxon battlefields as early as the seventh century.²⁶ Overall, scarce evidence for artistic patronage hampers efforts to match detailed sword imagery with warriors, but fluctuating levels of pictorial care convey a range of opinions regarding what swords were, as a concept, in early medieval minds: for some, they were 'blade-plus-hilt'; for others, including but not limited to warriors, they were blade, hilt, scabbard, sword-belt and more.

The Prestige of Age

Many images appear to show swords that were old and outdated by the time of their illustration.²⁷ One explanation could be that the image has an imprecise date: for instance, the ring-sword shown on the *guldgubbe* from Sorte Muld, Denmark may not be a chronological anomaly because ring-swords were still in use at the earlier end of the foil's sixth- to ninth-century dating.²⁸ Another explanation is that artists were copying from older pictorial models, an argument usually rehearsed for manuscripts²⁹

²⁴ Craig M. Nakashian, *Warrior Churchmen of Medieval England 1000–1250: Theory and Reality* (Woodbridge, 2016), pp. 128–9.

²⁵ Kent G. Hare, 'Clerics, War and Weapons in Anglo-Saxon England', *The Final Argument: The Imprint of Violence on Society in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Donald J. Kagay and L. J. Andrew Villalon (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 3–12 at pp. 8–12.

²⁶ Nakashian, *Warrior Churchmen*, pp. 133–5; Hines, 'Matters of Material'; Kevin Leahy and Roger Bland, *The Staffordshire Hoard* (London, 2014), pp. 30–3.

²⁷ Other types of war-gear appear in antiquated form in early medieval art, notably helmets: Monica Alkemade, 'A History of Vendel Period Archaeology: Observations on the Relationship between Written Sources and Archaeological Interpretation', *Images of the Past: Studies on Ancient Societies in Northwestern Europe*, ed. Nico Roymans and Frans Theuws (Amsterdam, 1991), pp. 267–97 at pp. 291–2; Svante Norr, 'Old Gold: The Helmet in *Hákonarmál* as a Sign of Its Time', *Valsgärde Studies: The Place and Its People, Past and Present*, ed. Svante Norr (Uppsala, 2008), pp. 83–114; Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert', p. 222; Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750–870*, *Studies in Early Medieval Britain* 2 (Aldershot, 2003), p. 271.

²⁸ Margrethe Watt, 'Kings or Gods? Iconographic Evidence from Scandinavian Gold Foil Figures', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 10 (1999), pp. 173–84 at p. 179.

²⁹ Carver, 'Contemporary Artefacts', p. 117; Lewis, *Archaeological Authority*, pp. 16–17.

but relevant to other media too. Stern identified swords brandished by horsemen on eleventh-century runestones from Skokloster (No. 25) and Sparlösa, Sweden as Petersen's Type D, current two centuries earlier.³⁰ The Skokloster sword certainly has Type D's rounded pommel and stocky lower guard, but the similarity between the horseman and tenth-century figurines from Birka, Sweden (Nos. 26–7) raises the possibility that Skokloster was based on earlier iconography, thereby perpetuating an antiquated sword-type.³¹ The question is whether the perpetuation was unwitting or deliberate. Anglo-Saxon art provides an example in which the latter may have been the case.

The tri-lobed sword pommel, named for its distinctive shape, was fashionable from the early eighth to late tenth centuries.³² Though outmoded by the eleventh century, Anglo-Saxon artists continued to portray it. At least ninety clear representations can be identified in eleventh-century art: eighty-eight in manuscripts, one on the Bayeux Tapestry and one on a stone cross-shaft in All Saints Churchyard at Brailsford, Derbyshire (No. 28; Fig. 9).³³ Eighty-nine per cent of these weapons are shown in the hands of figures with some form of 'special' status (Graph 1): kings, pharaohs and the people in their service, such as retainers, messengers and weapon-bearers;³⁴ major Biblical figures like Saul, Abraham, Moses, David, Joshua and Reuben;³⁵ the angels of God in two manuscripts; and in the Bury Psalter, Christ himself.³⁶ Since most of these scenes are set in the Biblical past, it could be argued that artists portrayed old swords here simply to serve the antique subject matter.³⁷ However, contemporary elite figures also carry tri-lobed swords, most notably King Cnut in the Winchester *Liber Vitae* (No. 29; Fig. 10) but also the figure on the Brailsford cross, who was of sufficient standing to be commemorated with a stone monument. Another candidate is a Norman warrior on the Bayeux Tapestry, who wears a tri-lobed sword and fights with a different one (Fig. 11). Some dismiss the tri-lobed pommel as a wobbly piece of

³⁰ Petersen, *De Norske Vikingsverd*, pp. 70–5, figs 59–60.

³¹ Pers. comm. Marjolein Stern.

³² Jakobsson, *Krigarideologi*, p. 72, Tabell 10.

³³ The shaft is weatherworn and covered with lichen, but inspection by sight and touch confirms the pommel's shape.

³⁴ No. 14, fol. 29: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 2.50; No. 8, fols 24v, 58v, 59, 68, 73, 73v, 76 and 79v; No. 8, fols 76 and 141; No. 8, fols 60v and 68; No. 8, fols 34, 68v, 71, 79v and 84.

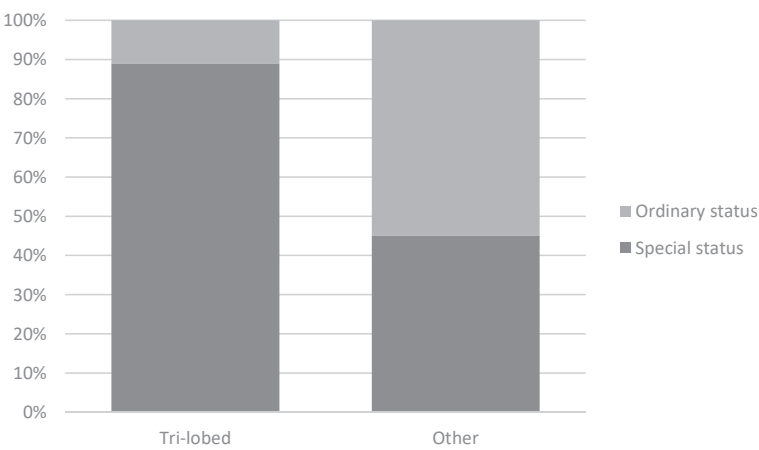
³⁵ No. 30, fol. 87v: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 3.32; No. 8, fols 38 and 95v; No. 8, fol. 75v; No. 16, fol. 93: Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, ill. 220 and No. 40, fol. 8v: *ibid.*, ill. 307; No. 8, fol. 95v; No. 30, fol. 109: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 3.43.

³⁶ No. 31, p. 46: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 16.23; No. 14, fol. 8v: *ibid.*, pl. 2.15; No. 14, fol. 88: *ibid.*, pl. 3.33.

³⁷ Carver, 'Contemporary Artefacts', p. 117; Lewis, *Archaeological Authority*, pp. 45–6.



Fig. 9: Sword with tri-lobed pommel outlined. Cross-shaft fragment, All Saints Church, Brailsford, Derbyshire (No. 28). © Sue Brunning. By kind permission of All Saints Church, Brailsford



Graph 1: Wielders of sword types in eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon art

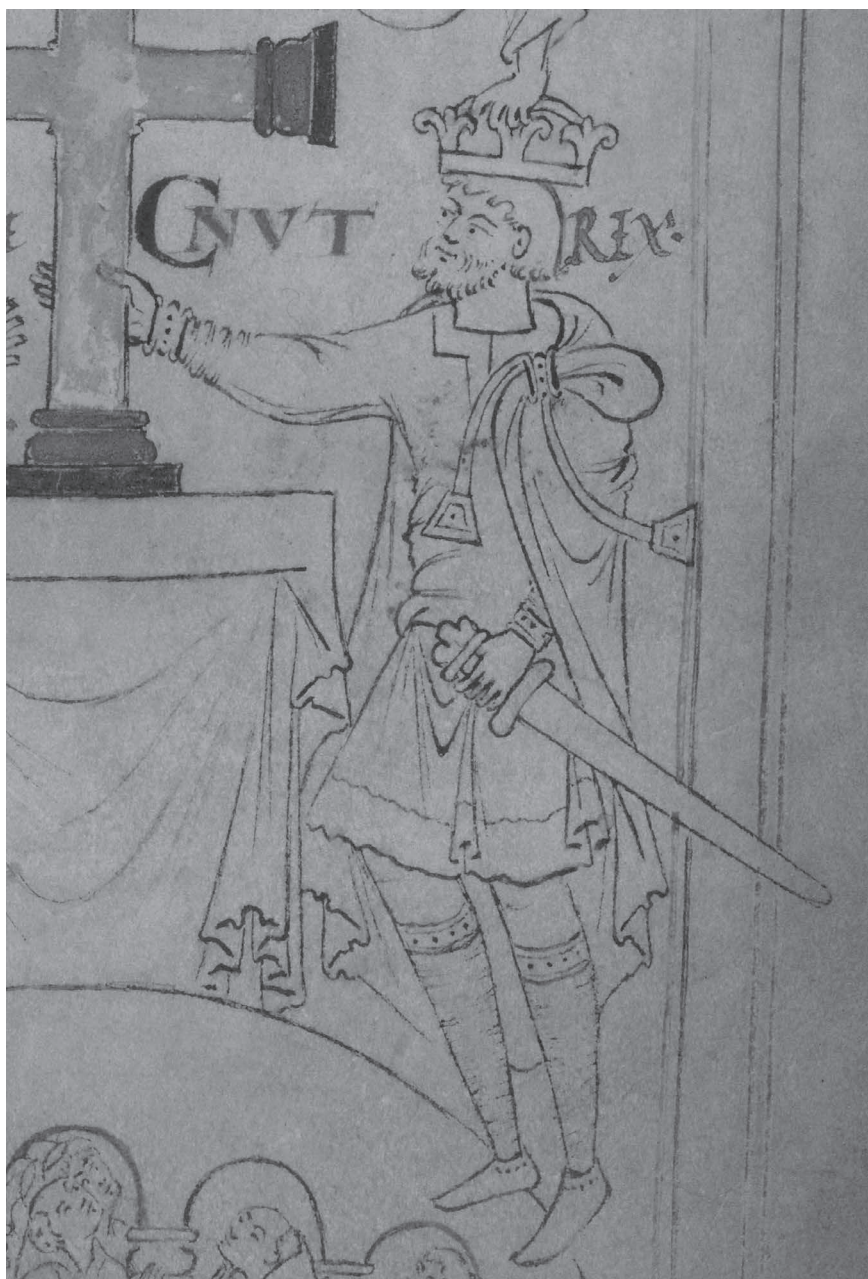


Fig. 10: King Cnut. © The British Library Board, MS Stowe 944, fol. 6 (No. 29)



Fig. 11: Warrior with tri-lobed sword (centre). Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scene 56 (No. 1).
© With special permission from the city of Bayeux

stitching, or the second sword as a hilt mistakenly added to what should have been an empty scabbard;³⁸ others read it as a reserve weapon or a prize that the Norman had snatched from his opponent.³⁹ These readings can be challenged. First, the tri-lobed pommel was depicted intentionally: close inspection confirms that its orange outline curves into the yellow field of the pommel and out again to make the distinctive lobed shape. Second, the care invested in war-gear throughout the Tapestry suggests that the designer would not have made the major error of adding an extra hilt to a scabbard, particularly if the design was marked out before stitching as experts believe.⁴⁰ Third, if the image reflects a convention of carrying reserve weapons, we might expect to see more two-sworded warriors on the Tapestry – but we do not. Finally, the sword is unlikely to have been snatched from the Norman's unarmoured opponent, as very few warriors without mail-coats carry swords in the battle scenes.⁴¹ It is reasonable to conclude from this that the Norman represents another elite individual defined by his ownership of a tri-lobed sword. This view is endorsed by the warrior's conspicuous pictorial context. He is positioned between two horses moving in opposite directions, their bodies acting like a visual frame that draws the eye towards him; his comrades are magnificently armed, one with a wyvern-emblazoned shield and a helmet with embellished nasal guard; and the very next scene is the most famous moment on the entire seventy-metre-long Tapestry – the death of Harold, King of England. What may be shown here is a moment in the battle, perhaps even a turning-point known to the Tapestry's audience but not conveyed through the ages,⁴² in which an elite Norman force met an elite Anglo-Saxon force containing the English king and his retainers, culminating in Harold's death – in which case the warriors involved, including the two-sworded Norman, were probably of some reputation. Perhaps the Tapestry's designer signified his standing and role in all of this by arming him with the iconic, ancient tri-lobed sword. The link between tri-lobed swords and important individuals is verified by a survey of other sword types in the same artworks. Just 45 per cent of these are carried by notable figures,⁴³ hinting further that Anglo-Saxon

³⁸ Lewis, *Archaeological Authority*, p. 51; Lucien Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, trans. Richard Rex (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 49 and 255.

³⁹ Kiff, 'Images of War', p. 192.

⁴⁰ Michael J. Lewis, 'Identity and Status in the Bayeux Tapestry: The Iconographic and Artefactual Evidence', *Anglo-Norman Studies XXIX* (2007), pp. 100–20 at p. 119; Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 10.

⁴¹ Only one other was identified: Scene 54, Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 66.

⁴² Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 195; Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 'The Interpretation of Gesture in the Bayeux Tapestry', *Anglo-Norman Studies XXIX* (2007), pp. 145–79 at p. 155.

⁴³ The Bayeux Tapestry is excluded on the grounds that its hundreds of swords obscure any pattern.

artists deliberately used the tri-lobed pommel as a signifier of special status.

Carver explained the tri-lobed pommel's longevity in Anglo-Saxon art as a form of pictorial fossilisation, a popular design that became part of the 'iconographic vocabulary' for how swords were portrayed and how audiences expected to see them.⁴⁴ The survey undertaken here offers the extra nuance that these motifs became part of the visual language for how *special personal status* was portrayed, using a particular type of sword as a vehicle. This may not have been an especially widespread convention: most of the artworks that deployed tri-lobed pommels in this way are known or thought to have been made in Canterbury,⁴⁵ possibly because of the high number of Canterbury manuscripts that survive in general,⁴⁶ or because its artists had developed an iconographic idea that influenced their output, and perhaps a few others beyond its limits, during the eleventh century.

Further support for the theory that artists actively portrayed old swords is found in the fact that they regularly illustrated newer war-gear alongside these weapons. Pointed helmets materialise in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art during the tenth century, concurrent with their appearance on the battlefield;⁴⁷ the same is true of kite-shaped shields and, perhaps crucially, disc-shaped sword pommels.⁴⁸ The implication is that artists did not blindly copy from pictorial models: they knew what newer swords looked like but still chose not to deploy them as a default sword motif throughout their artworks. Instead, they deliberately selected specific types of swords and paired them with specific wielders, reinforcing the impression that ancient swords were meaningfully rather than accidentally depicted.

⁴⁴ Carver, 'Contemporary Artefacts', pp. 129 and 118.

⁴⁵ Nos. 8, 1, 16, 30 and 31. The remainder are from Winchester: Nos. 30, 29 and 40.

⁴⁶ David N. Dumville, 'English Libraries before 1066: Use and Abuse of the Manuscript Evidence', *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings*, ed. Mary P. Richards (London, 2001), pp. 169–219, appendix.

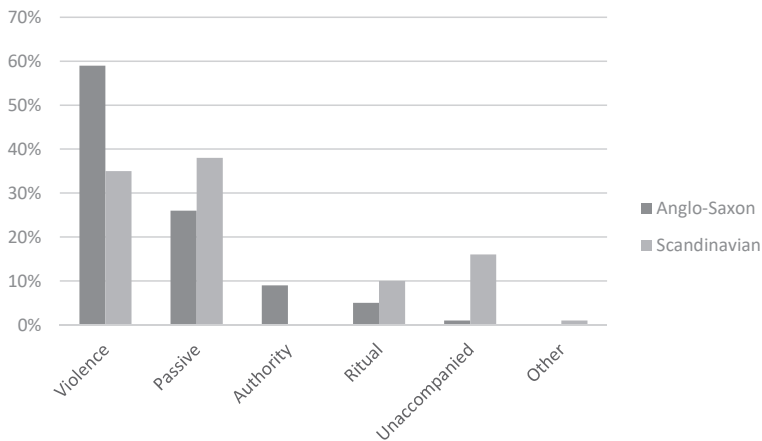
⁴⁷ In England, they occur in manuscripts (No. 40, fols 8v and 9: Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, ills 307–8, and throughout the Old English Hexateuch), stone sculpture (Nos. 32–6), the Bayeux Tapestry and on coinage; and in Sweden, on an antler carving from Sigtuna, metal figurines from Rällinge and Lindby (Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts*, nos. 482, 513 and 515) and a runestone from Ledberg (No. 37). See also Lewis, 'Bayeux Tapestry', pp. 181–3; Dominic Tweddle, *The Anglian Helmet from 16–22 Coppergate* (London, 1992), pp. 1129–31.

⁴⁸ In England, visible in the Harley Psalter, Old English Hexateuch (fols 24v, 36v, 73 and 76: Withers, *Old English Hexateuch*, CD-ROM), Bayeux Tapestry and a stone carving in St Nicholas' Church, Ipswich (No. 38), and in Scandinavia, on a runestone from Lund in Skåne, Sweden (No. 39).

Swords in Action

Artists portrayed swords in a range of contexts, from very active (in combat) to seemingly passive (sheathed or resting in the lap). The scores shown in violent action, whether martial, hunting, sacrifice or execution, are unsurprising; more remarkable is the number shown in *non-violent* contexts, simply worn or held by their owners, or solitary in the image. These weapons seem functionally dormant when compared to those brandished violently – but their pictorial context often tells a different story.

Around a tenth of Anglo-Saxon swords occur in scenes that convey an individual's authority (Graph 2). The Old English Hexateuch features several images of the Pharaoh enthroned with a sword or attended by a sword-bearer; King Saul is enthroned with a sword in the Bury Psalter, as are Guy of Ponthieu and William of Normandy in the Bayeux Tapestry.⁴⁹ These weapons can be read as passive ciphers of elite status, but their upright orientation connotes a more active meaning, perhaps embodying or enhancing the power of their wielder. This seems probable where those individuals are depicted in the act of asserting their command: the Pharaoh overseeing an execution in the Old English Hexateuch; Pilate dispensing with Christ in the Tiberius Psalter; and Herod commanding the Massacre of the Innocents in the Bury Psalter.⁵⁰ Conversely, reversed swords call



Graph 2: Contexts of use for swords in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art

⁴⁹ Pharaoh: fols 58v, 59 and 60v; sword-bearer: fols 22, 34 and 48: Withers, *Old English Hexateuch*, CD-ROM. Saul: fol. 87v: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 3.32. Guy: Scenes 9–10, Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, pls 9–10; William: Scenes 12, 14–15, 23 and 44, *ibid.*, pls 13, 16–17, 25 and 48.

⁵⁰ Pharaoh: fol. 59: Withers, *Old English Hexateuch*, CD-ROM. Pilate: fol. 12v: Francis Wormald, *The Collected Writings 1: Studies in Medieval Art from the Sixth to the Twelfth Centuries*, ed. J. J. G. Alexander, T. J. Brown and Joan Gibbs

their wielder's authority into question. On the Bayeux Tapestry, the English king Harold – labelled *Rex* in the accompanying inscription – is attended by a man raising an upright sword; but in the next scene, when Harold hears of William of Normandy's invasion, the attendant's sword is reversed and tucked away, and the label *Rex* has vanished (Fig. 12). Karkov interprets this juxtaposition as a comment on legitimate and illegitimate rule,⁵¹ a reading supported by Harold's poised bearing in the first scene and slumped posture in the second, embodying his deceitful rise to power via a broken oath to William. No other enthronement scene on the Tapestry depicts a reversed sword.⁵² As Karkov suggested, the Tapestry's designer seems to have used sword orientation as a barometer of authority. This may not have been a universal iconographic concept in Anglo-Saxon art, as several enthroned figures in manuscripts hold reversed swords without any hint that their leadership is dubious;⁵³ but overall the high incidence of upright weapons in this type of scene suggests that they were intended to convey an atmosphere of power and authority.

Scenes of ritual or ceremonial behaviour provide another non-violent, but not necessarily non-active, context for swords: a king 'dubbing' a retainer in the Harley Psalter; Spes granting the Sword of Vengeance to Humilitas in Prudentius' *Psychomachia*; God furnishing Christ with a sword in the Bury Psalter; and William presenting arms to Harold in the Bayeux Tapestry.⁵⁴ A group of earlier scenes may show swords being used in pagan rituals involving dance and processions.⁵⁵ These cryptic activities adorn helmet *Pressbleche* from Sutton Hoo (Suffolk) and Caenby (Lincolnshire) in England and Valsgårde and Gamla Uppsala (Uppland) in Sweden (Nos. 44–5), as well as *Pressblech* dies from Torslunda, Öland.⁵⁶ The sword's function in them is ambiguous, but small details offer clues.

(London, 1984), ill. 136. Herod: fol. 87v: Robert Mark Harris, 'The Marginal Drawings of the Bury St Edmunds Psalter (Rome, Vatican Library MS Reg. Lat. 12)', unpublished PhD thesis, Princeton University (1960), p. 204.

⁵¹ Karkov, *Ruler Portraits*, pp. 169–70.

⁵² In Scene 48, William's companion holds a horizontal sword – perhaps so that William's supremacy, signalled by his own upright sword, was prioritised visually (Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 48).

⁵³ No. 8: fols 65, 68, 73v and 83v: Withers, *Old English Hexateuch*, CD-ROM. No. 15: fol. 85v: Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, ill. 275.

⁵⁴ King: fol. 65: Judith Ellen Duffey, 'The Inventive Group of Illustrations in the Harley Psalter (British Museum Ms. Harley 603)', unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley (1977), pp. 129–30, fig. 17. Spes: No. 41, fol. 16: Richard Stettiner, *Die illustrierten Prudentiushandschriften: Tafelband* (Berlin, 1905), Taf. 55–6:5; No. 42, fol. 16v: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 15.22; No. 43, fol. 15: Stettiner, *Die illustrierten*, Taf. 55–6:11. God: fol. 32: Harris, 'Marginal Drawings', p. 421 and fig. 30. William: Scene 21: Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 24.

⁵⁵ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', pp. 137–9; Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert', pp. 203 and 281.

⁵⁶ Arent, 'The Heroic Pattern', pp. 133–45.



Fig. 12: Sword orientation in scenes of King Harold. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scenes 31–2 (No. 1).
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The bare, brandished swords on the Sutton Hoo, Caenby and Valsgärde helmets initially seem combative, but the figures' side-by-side (rather than opposed) arrangement and the reversed spears in their other hands reduce the scenes' aggressive potential. Indeed, they conform to a pattern of upright swords in ritualised episodes, mirroring the aforementioned weapons presented in the *Psychomachia* and Harley Psalter as well as others on picture-stones from Gotland, Sweden, depicting ceremonies before battle and at the raising of a picture-stone.⁵⁷ The orientation of these blades appears to frame them as active participants in the rituals, in partnership with their human wielders.

Reversed swords in similar scenes, however, need not be read as passive: often they seem to convey or embody messages about the ritual concerned. A line of warriors bearing ring-swords on the helmet from grave XIV at Vendel (Uppland), Sweden may be performing a rite of homage to their lord, their swords' inversion exemplifying their obedient position (Fig. 13).⁵⁸ The submissive mood is amplified by the fact that the swords are sheathed and held by the scabbard rather than the grip, a position from which the weapon could not easily be drawn. A female figure on the Oseberg embroideries mirrors this posture as she stands beside a tree hung with men perhaps sacrificed to Odin,⁵⁹ her reversed sword conceivably embodying her subservience to the god. Most poignant is a scene on a picture-stone from Tängelgård, Gotland (No. 78). It shows a procession of three men, possibly at a funeral, each one bearing a reversed sword that seems to personify the deceased's lifeless state.⁶⁰

Not all rites involving swords were bloodless. Images of execution and sacrifice, acts with a powerful ceremonial dimension, display an intriguing connection with swords. They are the most common weapon in these scenes, hinting that they were perceived as the appropriate tool for the task. Spears, conversely, feature in just one (potentially) sacrificial episode on a picture-stone from Stora Hammars on Gotland, Sweden.⁶¹ The evidence requires some contextualisation, however. The four scenes in which a sword is used as a sacrificial weapon all portray the same event: Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in the Book of Genesis (22.9–10); as such, the established Anglo-Saxon iconography for this scene may simply have involved a sword. Additionally, three of the images occur in copies

⁵⁷ Stora Hammars: Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 1991), p. 129; No. 46, uppermost panel: Sune Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine I* (Stockholm, 1941), figs 139–40; Sune Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine II* (Stockholm, 1942), p. 23.

⁵⁸ Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert', pp. 203–5 and 226.

⁵⁹ Fragment 4 in Christensen and Nockert, *Osebergfunnet*, pp. 376–7; Sofie Krafft, *Pictorial Weavings from the Viking Age: Drawings and Patterns of Textiles from the Oseberg Finds* (Oslo, 1956), p. 35.

⁶⁰ Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine I*, figs 86–8; Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine II*, p. 93.

⁶¹ Erik Nylén and Jan Peder Lamm, *Stones, Ships and Symbols* (Stockholm, 1988), p. 63.

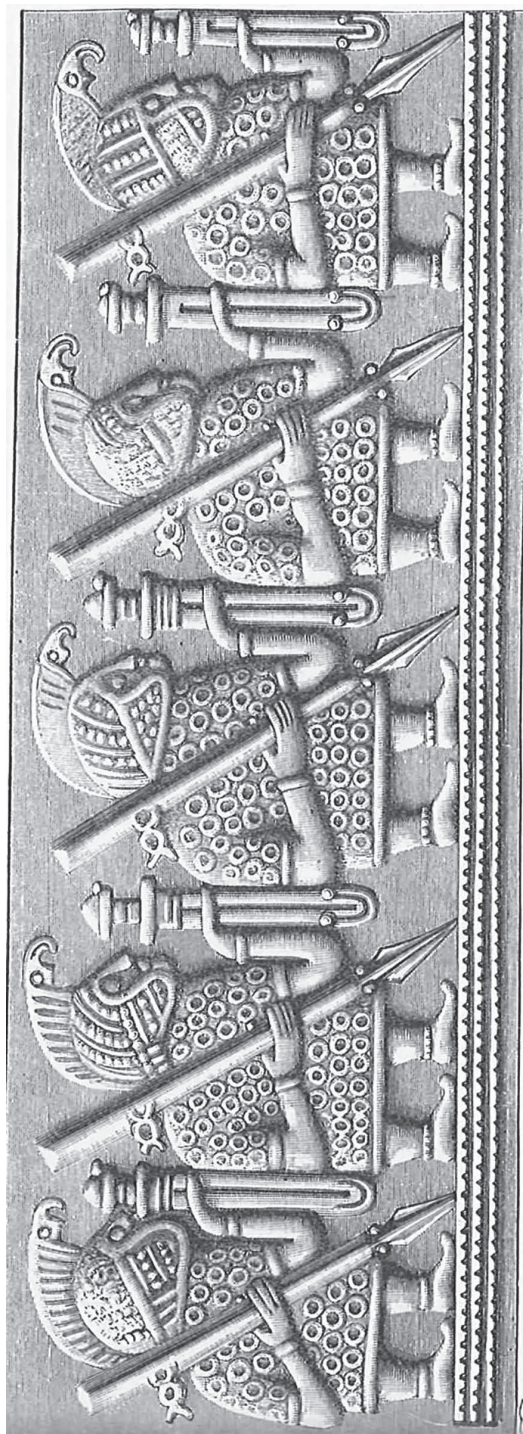


Fig. 13: Procession of warriors. Helmet, boat grave XIV, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden (No. 6): Arne and Stolpe, *La Nécropole*, pl. XLII, fig. 1.
© Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien

of Prudentius' *Psychomachia* that may have followed the same model, hence the recurrence of swords in the episode.⁶² The fourth image, in the Old English Hexateuch,⁶³ may simply mirror the text which describes Abraham using a sword.⁶⁴ The Benedictional of St Æthelwold's (No. 47) illustration of St Paul's martyrdom at the edge of a sword probably follows tradition about the event;⁶⁵ but the deaths of Saints Laurence and Peter in the Harley Psalter and Benedictional of St Æthelwold respectively⁶⁶ are more compelling, since neither was said to have been executed by sword. Perhaps the artists of these scenes placed swords in their executioners' hands because of the weapon's perceived connection with authority: both deaths were ordered by Roman emperors,⁶⁷ whose command may have been personified by the use of swords in these moments.

Beyond scenes of authority and ritual, most swords depicted in non-violent imagery are oriented point-downwards. Many still perform an active role, for instance distinguishing notable individuals from those around them. In the Junius manuscript, a group addressing Cain are headed and backed by men carrying swords. The foremost extends a hand towards Cain as if speaking for the group, hinting that the swordsmen are leaders or spokesmen.⁶⁸ Similar tableaux appear in the Old English Hexateuch, in which a swordsman leads Hebrews at a meeting with Pharaoh,⁶⁹ and in the Harley Psalter, where the 'King of Glory' is welcomed to a city by a man conspicuous among his companions via his sword.⁷⁰ The same pictorial technique recurs on the Gotlandic picture-stones. One from Ånge (No. 48) shows a group of five people, only two of whom have swords;⁷¹ another from Broa (No. 49) depicts two figures, one sworded and one not, flanking a seated figure;⁷² and on the Ardre stone, the central group of four on a six-crew ship are headed

⁶² No. 41, fol. 1: Stettiner, *Die illustrierten*, Taf. 49–50:1; No. 42, fol. 4: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 15.1; and No. 43, fol. 2: Stettiner, *Die illustrierten*, Taf. 49–50:8; Helen Woodruff, *The Illustrated Manuscripts of Prudentius* (Cambridge, MA, 1930), p. 20.

⁶³ Fol. 38: Withers, *Old English Hexateuch*, CD-ROM.

⁶⁴ Genesis 22:3–13: Samuel J. Crawford, ed., *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, Aelfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament, and his Preface to Genesis* (London, 1922), pp. 141–2.

⁶⁵ Fol. 95v: Robert Deshman, *The Benedictional of Æthelwold* (Princeton, 1985), fig. 31; George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 2nd edn (London, 1955), pp. 137–8.

⁶⁶ Fol. 19: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 2.34; fol. 95v: Deshman, *Benedictional*, fig. 31.

⁶⁷ Laurence under Valerian, Peter under Nero: David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 237–8 and 320–2.

⁶⁸ Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, ill. 192.

⁶⁹ Fol. 73v: Withers, *Old English Hexateuch*, CD-ROM.

⁷⁰ Fol. 13v: Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, pl. 2.23.

⁷¹ Third panel: Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine I*, figs 125–7.

⁷² Third panel: Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine I*, figs 394–6.

by two sword-wielders.⁷³ Admittedly, such small details require careful interpretation: the picture-stones have endured centuries of weathering and their re-painting by Swedish archaeologist Sune Lindqvist in the earlier twentieth century may not be perfectly accurate,⁷⁴ meaning that fewer – or more – swords may be present than can be seen today.

The theory that artists used the orientation of swords as a visual telegraph for certain ideas finds support in a comparison with spears. They occur in the same types of scenes as swords, but their orientation follows a different pattern: most are depicted pointing upwards or forwards. The incidence is so high that it whispers of a default iconographic position for spears, regardless of their function in the scene, and makes reversed or backwards-pointing spears seem visually jarring.⁷⁵ The inference may be that artists were more creatively inspired by swords, or perceived them to be more appropriate vehicles for the messages they wished to impart. Perhaps the weapon's real-life glamour and prestige magnetised the audience's attention, ensuring that the artist's ideas were consumed and understood.

ANIMATED SWORDS

The dynamism associated with swords in early medieval art finds its most powerful expression in images of combat. Here, artists' use of composition and scale presents swords as kinetic, animated beings. The repetitive juxtaposition of brandished swords on the picture-stone from Stora Hammars, Gotland imbues the whole monument with movement: near the top, two figures attack a third, the right-hand swordsman with his weapon raised and the left-hand swordsman chopping downwards so that the full sword-stroke is articulated between them, like a flick-book. Lower down, ship- and land-bound warriors face off with their blades raised in a matching diagonal posture to form an arresting tableau of violent action (Fig. 14). Swords (and axes) are arranged similarly on the renowned grave-marker from Lindisfarne Priory, Northumberland (No. 50). Equally dramatic are swords illustrated as outsized monsters that dwarf their wielders. In the Old English *Hexateuch*, this phenomenon has been attributed to the artist's fascination with swords or, more unfairly, poor skill:⁷⁶ in fact, it is a profoundly impactful device. The weapons' vast-

⁷³ Second panel: Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine I*, figs 139–40.

⁷⁴ Nylén and Lamm, *Stones*, p. 17. At the time of writing, an ongoing project of 3D digital scanning was underway and is likely to reveal finer details in the stones' imagery: Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt, '3D Scanning of Gotland Picture Stones', *Journal of Nordic Archaeological Science* 18 (2013), pp. 55–65.

⁷⁵ Rare examples occur on the Bayeux Tapestry, and the Sutton Hoo and Valsgärde *Pressbleche*: Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, figs 140–2; Arwidsson, *Valsgärde* 7, Abb. 138; Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, pls 8, 55 and 56.

⁷⁶ Hooper, '“Rows of the Battle-Swan”', pp. 92–3; Kiff, 'Images of War', p. 190;



Fig. 14: Battle. Picture-stone, 'Stora Hammars I', Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden (No. 10). © Johan Norderäng/Gotland's Museum

ness conjures a sense of frantic violence, especially on folios 24v, where massive swords dominate the midst of a battle, and 25, where four huge blades, spaced equally across the page and angled forwards in the same direction, build an impression of brutal onward momentum (Fig. 15). Most striking is the sword with which Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac. This enormous weapon, larger than Abraham himself, hangs menacingly above the pair and thrusts into the very text on the page, forcing the words to make way (Fig. 7).

In some of these images, swords visually mute their wielders. The viewer's eye is drawn to the weapon before it sees the person holding it, casting the wielder as almost secondary to the sword's action rather than its director. A small group of Scandinavian and Scandinavian-influenced images seem to go further by presenting swords in autonomous action. A stone grave-marker from Kirby Hill, North Yorkshire (No. 51), a sandstone slab from Tanberg, Norway (No. 52) and a decorated axe from Vladimir-Suzdal, Russian Federation depict a lone sword piercing the body of a serpent. This has been read as an abbreviation of Scandinavian iconography relating to the tale of Sigurðr (Sigurd), a mythical Norse hero who, according to later texts, slew the dragon Fáfnir with a sword called Grámr.⁷⁷ The full iconography, found on runestones from Ramsund, Gök and Drävle in Sweden (Nos. 11, 53–4), shows the hero himself stabbing the dragon;⁷⁸ the other version's wielderless sword may have been meant to stand in for Sigurðr, or signal to viewers that Fáfnir, and therefore Sigurðr's tale, was being referenced.⁷⁹ The use of war-gear as an abbreviation for human wielders may recur elsewhere in Scandinavian art. The Oseberg embroideries carry scenes in which shields and spears outnumber their bearers, while spears and arrows intermingled with armies seem to connote more warriors in the ranks than are physically shown.⁸⁰ Similarly, shields bedecking empty war-ships in eleventh-century images may have substituted for a human crew who were actually present in

Guy Francis Laking, *A Record of European Arms and Armour through Seven Centuries* (London, 1920), pp. 12–13.

⁷⁷ Richard N. Bailey, 'Scandinavian Myth on Viking Period Stone Sculpture in England', *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2–7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense, 2003), pp. 15–23 at p. 17; Fuglesang, *Some Aspects*, p. 84.

⁷⁸ Marjolein Stern, 'Sigurðr Fáfnisbani as a Commemorative Motif', *Á austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia. Preprint Papers of the 14th International Saga Conference Uppsala, 9th–15th August 2009 – Volume II*, ed. Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (Gävle, 2009), pp. 898–906.

⁷⁹ Emil Ploss, *Siegfried-Sigurd, der Drachenkämpfer: Untersuchungen zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage: Zugleich ein Beitrag Entwicklungsgeschichte des alteuropäischen Erzählgutes* (Cologne, 1966), p. 64.

⁸⁰ Christensen and Nockert, *Osebergfunnet*, pp. 373 and 377.

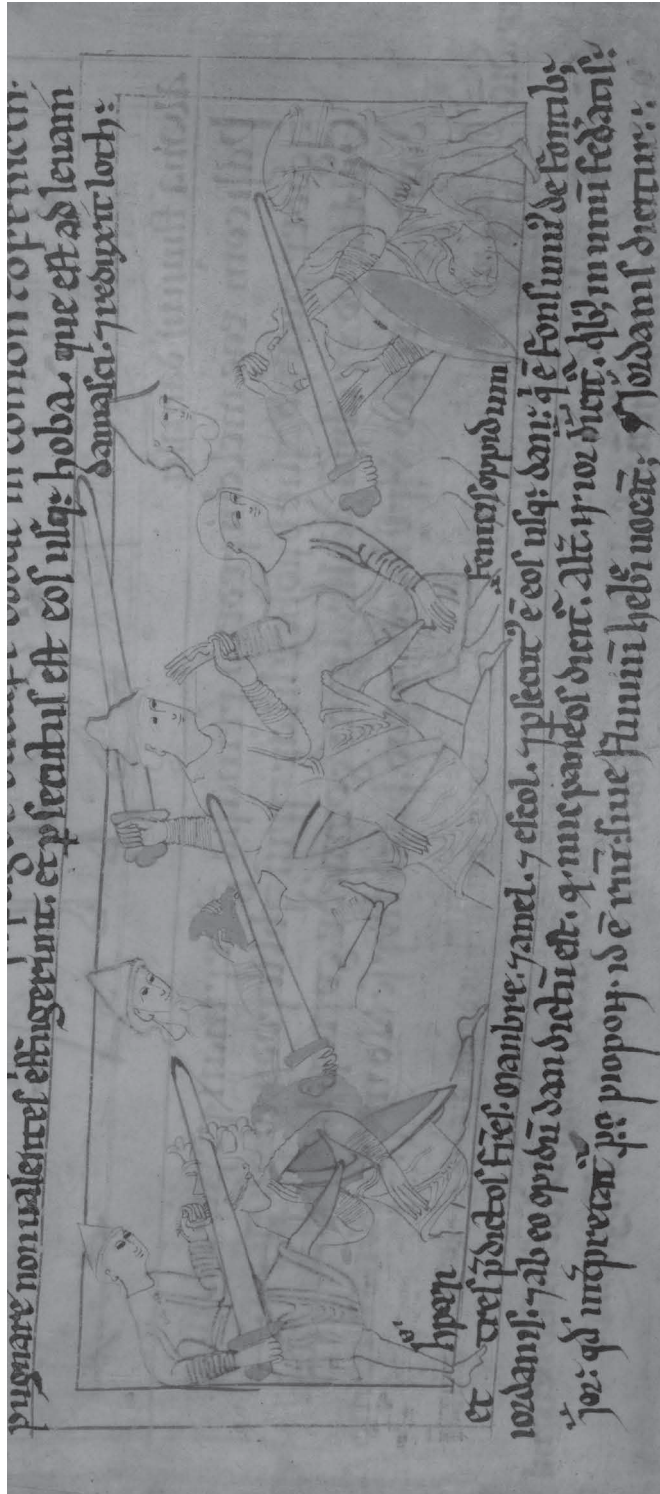


Fig. 15: Battle. © The British Library Board, Cotton Claudius B.IV, fol. 25 (No. 8)



Fig. 16: 'Sword St Peter' coin of Eiríkr 'Bloodaxe', 947–54 (No. 55). © Trustees of the British Museum

earlier versions of the iconography.⁸¹ In Scandinavian-ruled England, moreover, 'Sword St Peter' coins issued by tenth-century Viking rulers of York (plus a rare derivation struck at Lincoln: Nos. 55–6) replace the royal bust with a sword,⁸² so that it literally and figuratively 'stands in' for an authority figure (Fig. 16).

Not all wielderless weapons abbreviate human beings in this way. Archery equipment on Anglo-Saxon coins, war-gear graffiti on foreign coins found in Viking-period Scandinavia (Nos. 24 and 57) and weapon-shaped amulets (see below, p. 52) may instead have been intended to convey warrior identity, martial concepts or the kind of authority associated with warriorhood. The same might be true of a sword-shaped inscription on a runestone from Ryda (Västergötland), Sweden (No. 58), commemorating a man named Tœkr: its form perhaps embodying his

⁸¹ Fuglesang, 'Iconographic Traditions', pp. 7–8; see also the runestone from Ledberg, Sweden, No. 37.

⁸² Phillip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage, Volume 1: The Early Middle Ages (5th–10th Centuries)* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 323.

warrior status and its reversed orientation his lifeless state. In light of these examples, the solo swords in the Sigurðr iconography could be abbreviations for the hero – but they may also hint at a contemporary idea that swords could, in certain circumstances, act independently of their wielders. The only weapons shown in the act of actual physical violence are swords:⁸³ the wielderless weapons referenced above are more ambiguous in their function. The bow-and-arrow on the Anglo-Saxon coins, for instance, is poised to fire but not yet in the act of striking – quite different from the Sigurðr swords thrusting clean through the dragon's body. The stabbing sword motif is rare, but the fact that no other weapon is presented in this way invites speculation. Perhaps it hints that swords, as singular artefacts imbued with powerful symbolism, were thought capable of autonomous deeds.

Swords and Their Wielders

A sword is a weapon of war, but its relationship with warriors is not easy to decipher pictorially. Not all individuals shown wielding weapons necessarily represent 'warriors' in the modern sense. For instance, memorial imagery perhaps functioned similarly to furnished burials in that artists could select and arrange certain attributes, as mourners did artefacts, to convey specific ideas about the deceased.⁸⁴ Armed men on tenth-century sculptures in northern England are often described as warriors even though some, like that from Weston (West Yorkshire), bear only a sword (No. 59): a motif that, as argued here, carried diverse meanings dependent on its context. With these complexities in mind, three criteria were used to identify warriors in the images analysed in this study: information from associated texts; the presence of gear with a primarily martial function (swords, helmets, shields, armour); and participation in violence.

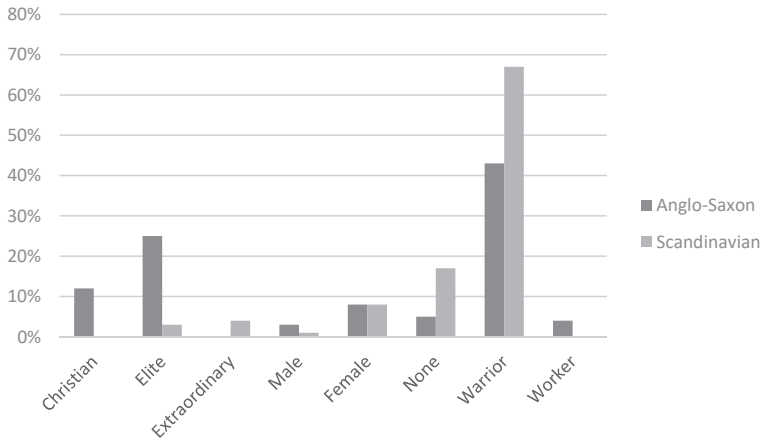
Swords and Warrior Identities

Warriors and swords are close companions in early medieval art. This is likely to follow where a sword is the only criterion available for identifying an individual; but it is also probable that an artist depicting a person with a sword intended that warrior concepts, at the very least, formed an aspect of that person's identity. Figures classifiable as warriors bear almost half of all swords in Anglo-Saxon art and two-thirds in Scandinavian art (Graph 3). This category, however, is too broad: elements of composition and detail suggest that a range of warrior iden-

⁸³ Pers. comm. Marjolein Stern on Swedish figural runestones.

⁸⁴ Williams, *Death and Memory*.

The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe



Graph 3: Wielders of swords in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art

tities existed, and swords were key to their pictorial expression. Warriors who fought with swords, for instance, apparently surpassed those who fought with other weapons. The rear panel of the Franks Casket, depicting Titus' siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, shows a warrior in the top left who is distinguished from his spear-wielding comrades by a sword and helmet. This, and his placement at the front of the troops, hints that he is Titus himself.⁸⁵ He confronts another swordsman who, judging from his weapon, may represent a Jewish commander. The Bayeux Tapestry's designer signalled seasoned Norman troops from levied Anglo-Saxons by equipping the former with swords, mail-armour and helmets and the latter with spears.⁸⁶ In one scene, two Anglo-Saxon warriors heading a team of infantry carry swords while their men do not. Their superiority is confirmed by their emblazoned shields, contrasting with their comrades' plain ones, and their position slightly apart from the main body of troops. Two swordsmen at their feet probably belonged to this leading group before they fell (Fig. 17). Scandinavian artists also used swords to connote leaders. Only the foremost men in a ship's crew carry swords on a picture-stone from Ardre, Gotland (No. 46), while the Oseberg embroidery shows groups armed with spears, others with spears and swords and some with swords alone.⁸⁷ The tenth-century sculptures from northern England, mentioned above (Nos. 28, 34–5 and 59–60), may also express the commemorated person's standing by pairing him with a sword. Sometimes he grasps the weapon and elsewhere it is beside him

⁸⁵ John Beckwith, *Ivory Carvings in Early Medieval England* (London, 1972), p. 117.

⁸⁶ Scenes 54 and 58: Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 220 and pls 66–7 and 73.

⁸⁷ Fragments 1–2, 3A and 11A: Christensen and Nockert, *Osebergfunnet*, figs 1–3 to 1–6, 1–63 to 1–66 and 1–3 to 1–11.

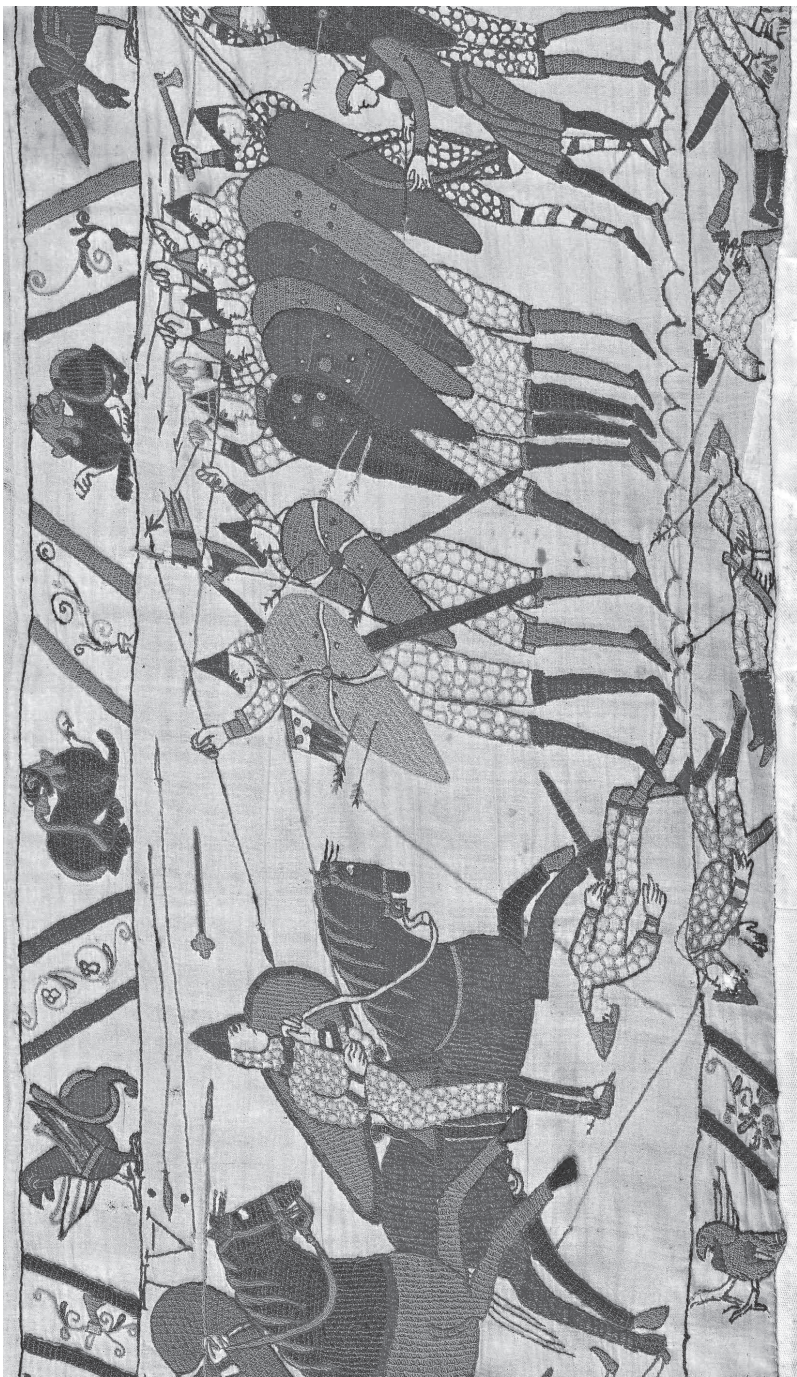


Fig. 17: Leaders with swords. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry – eleventh century, Scene 61 (No. 1). © With special permission from the city of Bayeux

with other artefacts, creating a tableau analogous to a furnished grave.⁸⁸ Whether the sword represents a grave good or a personal attribute, the message seems to be the same: the deceased and/or his mourners wished him to be remembered not only as a warrior (along with that status's masculine, martial and elite connotations),⁸⁹ but also as a specific *type* of warrior – a sword-wielder – superior to those bearing other weapons. This identity may have been real or idealised, an attempt to appropriate in death an air of leadership, power and success that was embodied in sword ownership and the image of a sword.

Other images reveal that the identity of 'sword-warrior' was itself nuanced. The earlier discussion of tri-lobed sword pommels demonstrated how Anglo-Saxon artists used different types of swords to distinguish different classes of sword-wielder. Scandinavian artists may have done the same. On a *Pressblech* die from Torslunda, Sweden, one warrior carries a ring-sword, denoted by a circlet on its hilt, but his companion's weapon lacks this detail (Fig. 6).⁹⁰ Similarly the helmet from grave 7 at Valsgärde, Sweden shows a horseman with ring-sword trampling a foe with an ordinary sword.⁹¹ Ring-swords were probably the weapon of elite retainers, the ring symbolising an oath sworn to a lord (see pp. 11, 78–81, 117–18).⁹² Their depiction in art supports this reading, implying that artists were not only aware of, but actively illustrated, competing types of sword-wielder whose differences were embodied by their swords.⁹³ The manipulation of sword imagery thus articulates the existence of a range of warrior identities in early medieval minds, and that the *grade* of warrior mattered. Swords existed at the heart of those identities, mediating not only between warriors and civilians, but also between different types of warriors – and sword-wielders.

Swords and Women

The collected images uphold the traditional association between swords, men and masculinity in the early medieval period; but a small group of illustrations place swords in female hands. The Anglo-Saxon *Psychomachia*

⁸⁸ Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts*, p. 160 with references; Hadley, 'Warriors, Heroes and Companions', p. 275.

⁸⁹ Hadley, 'Negotiating Gender', p. 316; Harrison, *Symbols and Warriors*, pp. 3 and 53; Julian Daryl Richards, 'Anglo-Scandinavian Identity', *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. Helena Hamerow, David A. Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford, 2011), pp. 46–61 at p. 56.

⁹⁰ Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert', p. 205.

⁹¹ Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, Abb. 133.

⁹² Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert', pp. 203–5; Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, p. 25.

⁹³ While Hadley warns against attaching too much meaning to 'distinctions in military apparel' in stylised images like these, she concludes that variation can be informative ('Warriors, Heroes and Companions', p. 277).

manuscripts personify the Virtues and Vices as sword-wielding women, perhaps mirroring the text rather than reflecting a conscious artistic choice. More intriguing are Scandinavian swordswomen on the Oseberg embroideries,⁹⁴ Ardre picture-stone from Gotland (second panel, No. 46) and metal brooches, mounts and figurines depicting women with knotted ponytails (Nos. 61–70). Intriguingly, none of these sword-bearing women can be described as ‘regular’ – all are extraordinary. The Vices and Virtues are personified human traits; the Ardre women may be mythical figures;⁹⁵ and the Oseberg warriors have been interpreted as Amazons at the legendary battle of Brávellir.⁹⁶ The metal artefacts probably represent Valkyries, the helpers of Odin in Norse mythology.⁹⁷ Gardela hazards that the three-dimensional ‘Valkyrie’ from Hårby, Denmark (Fig. 18) depicts a real-life warrior woman, since later texts about Valkyries do not link them with swords: a claim countered convincingly by Jesch.⁹⁸ The abiding message from art is that swords and femininity intersected only within the extraordinary worlds of myth and mind.

However, real women did ‘wield’ swords in a different representational way. Hundreds of miniature weapon-shaped ‘amulets’ from the sixth to eleventh centuries have been found in female graves both in England and Scandinavia. Worn as pendants, sewn to clothing or suspended from belts, they are widely seen as apotropaic devices, protecting their wearer from harm or ill-fortune. Most represent shields, an appropriate defensive symbol; but swords were popular too.⁹⁹ A novel perception of swords is evoked by this usage: rather than the aggressive, blood-spilling weapons of art, swords are recast as protective instruments with which one could defend oneself and one’s community.

Sword amulets exemplify the broad reach of sword imagery, made, owned and consumed by a range of social groups – secular and ecclesiastical, warrior and civilian, male and female. Some images were widely accessible, like memorial stones and crosses in the landscape or churchyards, or large embroideries like Bayeux and Oseberg, visible to those who entered the structures they adorned. Other images were more restricted,

⁹⁴ Christensen and Nockert, *Osebergfunnet*, pp. 35–6.

⁹⁵ Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine II*, pp. 23–4; David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, 2nd edn (London and Boston, MA, 1980), pp. 80–2.

⁹⁶ Their beast-masks confirm their otherworldliness: Christensen and Nockert, *Osebergfunnet*, pp. 117–18.

⁹⁷ Gareth Williams, Peter Pentz and Matthias Wemhoff, *Viking* (Copenhagen, 2013), pp. 116–17.

⁹⁸ Gardela, ‘“Warrior-Women”’; Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (London, 2015), pp. 105–6.

⁹⁹ Audrey Lilian Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 96 (Oxford, 1981), pp. 148–59; Ulf Näsman, ‘Väpneminiatyrer från Eketorp’, *Tor* 15 (1975), pp. 94–102; Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeiten, ‘Amulets and Amulet Use in Viking Age Denmark’, *Acta Archaeologica* 68 (1997), pp. 1–74 at pp. 2–5 and 15–18.

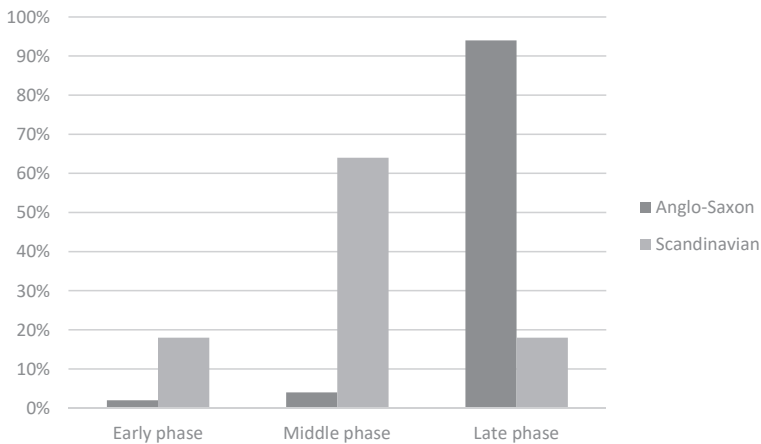


Fig. 18: Figurine of a Valkyrie, Hårby, Funen, Denmark (No. 69). © Arnold Mikkelsen/The National Museum of Denmark

such as ornamented war-gear or deluxe manuscripts preserved for their user's view. An observer's response to sword imagery would have been shaped by their social experiences: warriors may have felt a rush of masculine thrill when viewing a brandished sword; women may have seen a symbol of protection; others an instrument of power or fear.

Perceptions of Swords over Time

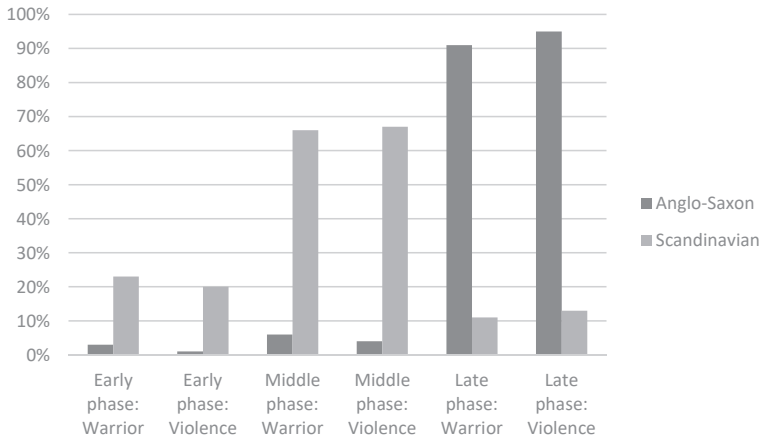
Sword imagery spans the Early Middle Ages, offering a valuable opportunity to explore how perceptions of swords changed between the early (c. 500–700), middle (c. 700–900) and late (c. 900–1100) phases of the period. In Anglo-Saxon England, images of swords peak in the latest phase, while in Scandinavia they are distributed more evenly but with a visible peak in the middle phase (Graph 4). The impact of the Bayeux Tapestry and the zenith of manuscript production partly explain the Anglo-Saxon pattern, but a concurrent rise in the number of swords shown in violent contexts and wielded by warriors (Graph 5) suggests that the trend belongs to a general increase in violent imagery (spears follow a similar pattern). The creation of violent art has been linked to periods of unrest,¹⁰⁰ but sparse evidence for the earliest period in England, and for Scandinavia throughout, hampers attempts to compare the incidence of violence over time with patterns in art. Nonetheless, it can be said that the peak in sword imagery coincides with intense Viking activity and conflict between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. Indeed, most Scandinavian images



Graph 4: Sword motifs by chronological phase in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art

¹⁰⁰ Harrison, *Symbols and Warriors*, p. 3.

The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe



Graph 5: Violent imagery by chronological phase and culture

of swords from this time appear on picture-stones and runestones that often acted as memorials, some perhaps commemorating Vikings killed in action. If violent times fuelled violent imagery, the concurrent spike in swords shown spilling blood may point towards a development in how these weapons were perceived. Their function as weapons perhaps began to dominate early medieval thought, balancing or even overshadowing their wider social and symbolic relevance.

The rise of sword imagery and its link with violence and warriors may also have been shaped by the interplay of art, religion and secular society. Swords rarely materialise in Anglo-Saxon art before the latest phase, outnumbered by spears and archery equipment in Christian iconography relating to archers or the Crucifixion (Nos. 74–7); but after 900, a surge in secular imagery stimulated depictions of warriors and their gear, including swords. This trend of Christian imagery yielding to a greater variety of pictorial content can be linked to developments in artistic patronage, which drifted progressively from monastic towards secular sponsorship over the period. The warrior sculptures in northern England have been interpreted in this light,¹⁰¹ and a similar shift may have influenced manuscript production.¹⁰² Martial scenes in manuscripts illustrate Biblical texts in which conflict was a central theme; but they also mirrored the tastes of new, secular, Anglo-Saxon patrons who were intimately acquainted with

¹⁰¹ Richard N. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England* (London, 1980), pp. 81–3; Bailey, 'Scandinavian Myth', p. 16; Hadley, 'Warriors, Heroes and Companions', pp. 277–8; Hadley, 'Negotiating Gender', pp. 318–20; James Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, Volume VI: Northern Yorkshire* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 34–6.

¹⁰² Certainly, better records describing secular book patrons survive after about 800: Michelle P. Brown, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* (London, 1991), pp. 27–30.

the battlefield. Scandinavian art supports this theory: since Christianity arrived here so late, secular patrons had always fuelled artistic production and, consequently perhaps, its art is punctuated by imagery of warriors, violence and swords throughout the period.

Perceptions of Swords in Space

Viewing sword imagery from a cultural perspective appears to reveal compelling distinctions between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian attitudes towards swords. More than twice the number of sword images derive from England as from Scandinavia, and they appear in a greater range of pictorial contexts. This is due in part to sparser information about Scandinavian imagery, but culturally specific factors also play a role. The arrival of Christianity and its influence on visual culture is the foremost of these. From the late sixth century, conversion brought a new artistic medium to Anglo-Saxon England: manuscripts. It also brought a host of new pictorial themes associated with Christian and Classical texts, furnishing artists with greater opportunities for deploying sword imagery. So many manuscripts survive today because Christian culture strove to preserve its books, exemplified by the monks of Lindisfarne conveying their manuscripts, including the famous Gospels, from the island in 875 in the wake of Viking raids.¹⁰³ The role manuscripts played in proliferating and preserving sword imagery is reflected in the fact that most of it derives from these works. Scandinavia's late conversion denied its artists this medium, restricting the amount of sword imagery that they were able to produce. Moreover, the media they did use, including metalwork, stone and organic materials, may have lacked the culture of preservation that attended Christian books, meaning that an uncountable number of sword illustrations have probably been lost. Chance survivals like the embroideries and wooden cart from Oseberg, Norway (No. 71) offer a glimpse of perished imagery that, had it survived, may have helped to redress the imbalance between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian sword imagery.

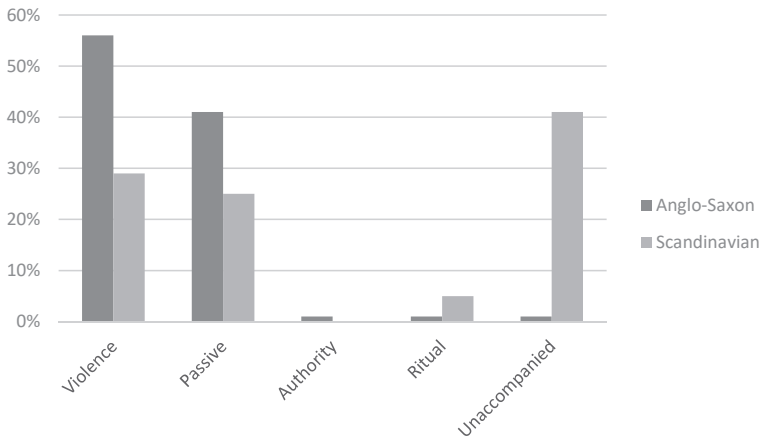
Another cultural distinction concerns the phenomenon of wielderless swords, which is far more common in Scandinavian art. Sword-shaped amulets, depicted without a human bearer, survive only from Scandinavia: at the time of writing, none were known from England: the few miniature swords recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database are dated to the Iron Age and Roman periods based on their form,¹⁰⁴ and while less

¹⁰³ Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (London, 2003), p. 85.

¹⁰⁴ LIN-B08E07 from the Lincolnshire Wolds; LEIC-7B9381 from Frisby, Leicestershire; GLO-F52980 from the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire.

diagnostic examples could be early medieval in origin, they lack a datable archaeological context. The closest Anglo-Saxon parallel is the sword-shaped shield ornament from Edix Hill and a tiny sword motif inlaid in wire on a sword-blade from Sarre, Kent (No. 72). The cultural imbalance could be due, in part, to a lack of surviving Anglo-Saxon evidence; but, compellingly, it is clear that only Scandinavian or Scandinavian-influenced images depict swords engaged in autonomous, unambiguous bloodshed. These images may signal that Scandinavian artists were more willing to use war-gear as abbreviations for warriors, perhaps as mere iconographic convention or even reflecting an attitude that warriors and their swords could fuse into a single, collaborative being, crossing what appears to have been a permeable boundary between person and artefact (see below, pp. 150–1). Alternatively, they pose the possibility that ‘living’ swords, thought capable of independent behaviour, were a more Scandinavian concept.

Images showing authority figures brandishing swords are more characteristic of Anglo-Saxon art. By contrast, Scandinavian art links swords more closely with warriors (Graph 3). Here, swords occur in a similar ratio to spears in violent scenes, implying that Scandinavians viewed these items as typical warrior kit. Swords are far less common than spears in equivalent Anglo-Saxon scenes (Graph 6), suggesting that they were considered primarily as elite, rather than regular, warrior accoutrements. This trend may mirror the wider accessibility of swords in Scandinavian society, for which some experts have argued – it may even have been influenced by it.¹⁰⁵ However, the absence of Scandinavian scenes match-



Graph 6: Contexts of use for spears in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art

¹⁰⁵ DeVries, *Norwegian Invasion*, pp. 195–7.

ing swords with authority could be due to our inability to recognise them. Unlike much Anglo-Saxon art, Scandinavian imagery usually lacks accompanying inscriptions or contemporary texts that can help viewers to decode scenes and classify sword-wielders. Instead, individuals are identified 'cold' based on their pictorial context, attributes and references in much later texts. The risk is that figures identified as warriors may in fact represent gods, heroes or kings. Thus, contexts and wielders that appear to be missing from Scandinavian art may, in fact, be present but are now unidentifiable. One case study, however, offers a clue that Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians genuinely held different views about the relationship between swords and authority.

The portrait of Cnut in the eleventh-century Winchester *Liber Vitae* is the only surviving undisputed image of a sword-bearing Scandinavian king, albeit in an Anglo-Saxon context (Fig. 10). Karkov has shown that swords rarely appeared in Anglo-Saxon royal iconography before this,¹⁰⁶ and the collected images support her view: while Biblical kings, pharaohs and the King of Heaven carry them, real-life Anglo-Saxon monarchs do not. The only candidate is the Repton Stone, an eighth-century sculpture of a sword-wielding figure that some (but not all) argue is a king (No. 73).¹⁰⁷ Only after Cnut's portrait were actual kings of England, like Edward the Confessor, Harold II and William I, portrayed with swords.¹⁰⁸ Thus, while swords were clearly powerful symbols in both Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian art, their contrasting usage may reflect contrasting viewpoints: in England, swords were exclusive pictorial motifs pertaining to elite power until late in the period, while in Scandinavia they were always weapons of war denoting fighting men, elite or otherwise. Intriguingly, most Anglo-Saxon images of sword-bearing warriors date to the Scandinavian settlement period with virtually all stone examples occurring in Scandinavian-controlled regions of northern and western Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Suffolk. It is possible that Scandinavian ideas about swords inspired Anglo-Saxons to view and depict them increasingly as the attributes of real individuals rather than the superlative figures of the Biblical and Classical past.

* * *

The sword's dynamic character in early medieval art provides a wealth of information about contemporary perceptions of this weapon. The detail which artists afforded to different sword-parts conveys a range of ideas about what exactly a sword was thought to be, with different groups likely to supply quite different answers. Images of ancient swords and their

¹⁰⁶ Karkov, *Ruler Portraits*, pp. 135–6 and nn. 76 and 79.

¹⁰⁷ Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle, 'The Repton Stone', *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985), pp. 233–92 at pp. 263–4 and 289–90.

¹⁰⁸ Karkov, *Ruler Portraits*, pp. 156, 160–3 and 172.

link with important figures imply that antiquity heightened a sword's prestige. Art not only confirms that swords were important attributes of warriors, but also that the nature of that importance varied between cultures. Swords were used actively to express and construct warrior identities in art and potentially in reality, dividing sword-warriors from non-sword-warriors and even denoting different grades of sword-warrior. However, these weapons were not only relevant to those who used them for fighting: they were also important symbols for women, albeit with an alternative emphasis on their protective rather than aggressive qualities. The overriding impression gained from studying swords in art is that their meanings and relevance were exceptionally diverse, a theme that is confirmed in the chapters to come.

Archaeology

The archaeology of Anglo-Saxon swords conveys the regard in which they were held. They are found primarily in contexts with a marked ritual flavour: bodies of water such as rivers, streams and bogs; and burials, both inhumations and cremations. Individual parts of swords do occur as stray finds, particularly hilt, scabbard and harness fittings that were more prone to loss; but these too played a role in ritualised behaviour, buried singly in graves and, most spectacularly, amassed together in the Staffordshire Hoard. The ways in which swords were treated both during and at the end of their 'lives' are of immense value to understanding contemporary perceptions of these weapons. This chapter focuses primarily on swords in funerary contexts, based upon a sample of inhumation burials from sites across England, and parts of Scandinavia for comparison. The sites were selected from existing burial studies that provide a good chronological and geographical spread, together with some newer sites with available records (see Map 1).¹ To some extent the sample was dictated by the distribution of sword burials, which concentrate in certain regions. In England during the furnished burial period (fifth to late seventh centuries), they occur primarily south and east of a line between the River Severn and the Wash, with a concentration in Kent; and after a hiatus they recur in graves during a limited northerly revival of furnished burial in the ninth to tenth centuries, possibly in response to Scandinavian incursions.² In Scandinavia, sword burials occur throughout the early medieval period, and in Sweden focus particularly around the easterly Mälars region and on Gotland; in Denmark, on the Baltic island of Bornholm; and in Norway, in

¹ For England, primarily following Bayliss et al., *Anglo-Saxon Graves*; for Scandinavia, Anne Nørgård Jørgensen, *Waffen und Gräber: Typologische und chronologische Studien zu skandinavischen Waffengräbern 520/30 bis 900 n. Chr.* (Copenhagen, 1999). The database is available on the Archaeology Data Service website at <https://doi.org/10.5284/1051621>, DOI 10.5284/1051621.

² Guy Halsall, 'The Viking Presence in England? The Burial Evidence Reconsidered', *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 259–76; Angela Z. Redmond, *Viking Burial in the North of England: A Study of Contact, Interaction and Reaction between Scandinavian Migrants with Resident Groups, and the Effect of Immigration on Aspects of Cultural Continuity*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 429 (Oxford, 2007).

The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe



Map 1: Northern Europe, showing burial sites referenced in the text.
By Craig Williams

various central and southern regions.³ These chronological and regional idiosyncrasies have a bearing on how the evidence can be analysed and interpreted.

³ Anne Nørgård Jørgensen, 'The Weapon Graves of Northern and Central Europe', *Nørre Sandegård Vest: A Cemetery from the 6th–8th Centuries on Bornholm*, ed. Lars Jørgensen and Anne Nørgård Jørgensen (Copenhagen, 1997), pp. 86–118; Ulf Bodin, *Vapengravar i Mälaramrådet: En studie av vapenfrequenser och vapenkombinationer under Folkvandristid, Vendeltid och Vikingatid* (Uppsala, 1987), pp. 16–17.

Perceptions of Swords in Early Medieval Archaeology

One aspect of archaeological swords stands out as remarkable: their condition. Many appear to be worn, modified or refurbished, indicating that they had been 'curated', or deliberately retained, maintained and kept relevant by their owners. These weapons had presumably 'lived' long 'lives', generating intricate biographies and social networks, travelling from home to home as heirlooms, gifts, spoils or other forms of transaction. While archaeologists have certainly noted the existence of 'old' swords, a cohesive study of the phenomenon has yet to take place.⁴ This chapter offers a case study based on early Anglo-Saxon inhumation graves in comparison with contemporaneous burials in Scandinavia.

Finding 'old' swords in burials is not a straightforward matter of comparing the probable date of the grave with that of its sword. First, swords are typically dated by the typological or decorative features of their hilt and scabbard fittings; but these are often missing since most were made from perishable horn, bone or antler.⁵ Second, swords are made from multiple, largely interchangeable, components, meaning that individual swords could (and did) become 'Frankenstein' types made from fittings of differing date, type and style. Consequently, only the constituent parts, and not the whole sword itself, can be dated reliably.⁶ The best method for identifying long-lived swords is not by calculating their physical years but by examining their physical condition. Signs of wear, repair and modification are most easily sought on metal fittings: blades are often so corroded that signs of re-sharpening, polishing, damage and so on are difficult to find without specialist techniques. By contrast, the condition of metal fittings – especially non-ferrous ones – can be seen with the naked eye: something that may also have helped to shape perceptions of these weapons in the past. Focusing on metal-trimmed swords reduces the number of weapons for analysis but supplies a large enough corpus for detailed study.

⁴ Ager, 'Swords', pp. 1–10; Härke, 'Circulation of Weapons', pp. 393–4; Bone, 'The Development', p. 63; Williams, *Death and Memory*, pp. 30 and 40; for the Continent, see especially Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klingen*, p. 255.

⁵ A horn hilt from Cumberland is a remarkably rare exception (British Museum, accession no. 1876,0717.1). It is also decorated with gold filigree mounts of seventh-century style that may be later than the hilt itself. This curious artefact, discovered in the antiquarian period and never fully published, would benefit from a thorough modern analysis.

⁶ Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, pp. 24–6; Theuvs and Alkemade, "'A Kind of Mirror'", p. 444; Peter H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd edn (London, 1971), pp. 58–61.

Wear

Signs of wear and tear are encountered frequently on metal sword fittings. They manifest as the smoothing of relief ornament; a loss of crispness to recessed (punched and incised) ornament; the flattening of filigree wire; abrasion and dulling of surfaces; and the loss of gilding, niello (a soft, black compound of sulphur and silver used as a decorative inlay) or inlays. Wear occurs on all types of sword and scabbard fittings but is especially prevalent on the hilt.

Signs of wear are not, however, reliable informants for precisely how long a sword had circulated. Different metals and decorative techniques would have degraded at different rates. Gold was the softest metal from which sword fittings were made and wore more quickly than harder silver or copper-alloy fittings. Similarly, relief ornament like chip-carving and filigree was at greater risk than recessed decoration because it stood proud of the surface. The most vulnerable combination of metal and ornament was gold filigree which, when worn, displays a characteristic hallmark of flattened beads or twists that appear to merge together, losing their individual integrity and coming to resemble a plain strip of gold. Thus, while gold fittings with relief ornament degraded more quickly and clearly, they may not be much older than silver or copper-alloy fittings with subtler signs of wear.

Corrosion offers another analytical challenge. Degradation is easy to spot on gold fittings because they do not corrode, but this is not the case with copper alloy, which survives in poorer condition. An example is a sixth-century pommel from Elms Estate, Croydon (No. 80) with deteriorated punched motifs, the cause of which – wear or corrosion – is hard to discern. Corrosion also causes gilding to flake off and inlays to be lost, both of which can resemble wear. A final wrinkle is that some worn areas may not have been caused in the past, but by over-vigorous polishing or conservation methods in more modern times.⁷ Encouragingly, wear patterns observed on older finds occur also in the meticulously conserved Staffordshire Hoard: the filigree on one pommel, for instance, is so dilapidated that the individual beads could not be measured (Fig. 19).⁸ Being sensitive to these challenges is vital when interpreting any sword's condition.

Wear typically occurs in the same places on sword fittings: the top of the pommel and the upper parts of its broad faces. This is so typical that it can be described as a 'signature' and can be used as a guide for finding wear on other swords (Fig. 20). The silver pommel on a ring-sword from Buckland, Dover (Kent) (No. 81) has an incised ring-and-dot motif on one

⁷ Pers. comm. Fleur Shearman, Conservator, British Museum.

⁸ Pers. comm. Aude Mongiatti, Scientist, British Museum; Fern et al., *Staffordshire Hoard*, cat. no. 40.



Fig. 19: Pommel with worn filigree ornament. Staffordshire Hoard, Fern et al., *Staffordshire Hoard*, cat. no. 40. © Birmingham Museums Trust

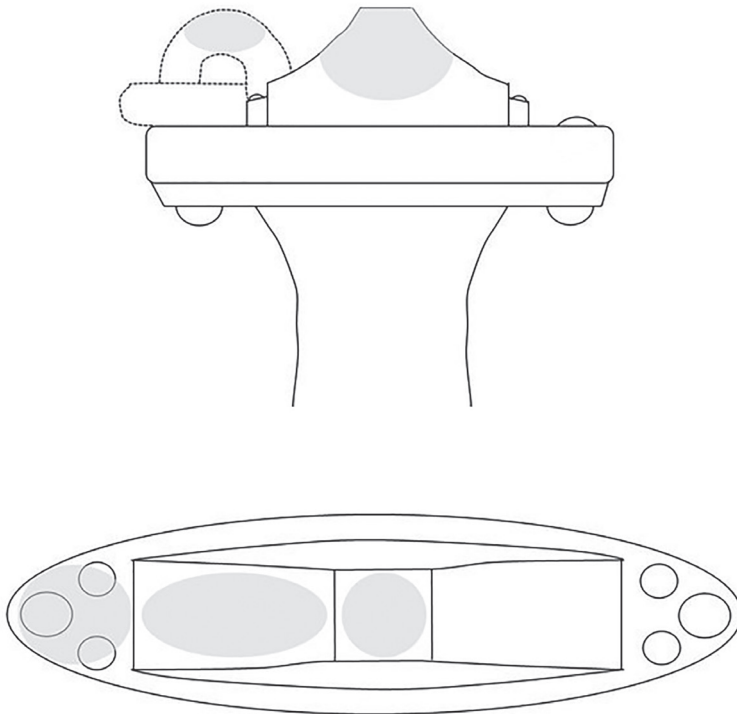


Fig. 20: Typical locations for wear on sword hilts, viewed from the broad face (top) and the top (bottom). © Sue Brunning

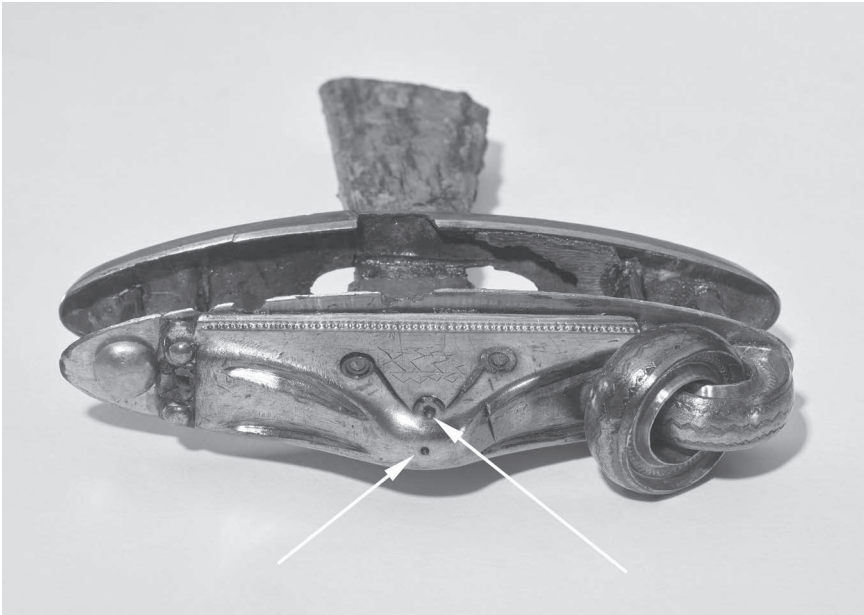


Fig. 21: Ring-sword with worn areas marked. Grave C, Buckland, Dover (Kent) (No. 81). © Trustees of the British Museum

face, but the ring's upper curve disappears where the top of the pommel has worn down. A tiny dot on the pommel's top may be the ghost of another motif obliterated by wear (Fig. 21). Similarly, an incised linear border edging a pommel from grave 93 at Mitcham (Surrey) (No. 82) vanishes towards the top, as does a ring-and-dot motif on another from grave 192 at the same site (No. 83). This pattern is matched on a ring-sword from grave 39 at Patrixbourne, Bifrons (Kent) (No. 84). The pommel top shows traces of punched ornament that has almost worn away, while gilding and punched triangles on top of the ring-fitting are vague compared to others on the pommel, having shallowed out as the metal surface wore down over time (Fig. 22). Erosion to the zigzag line and triangle punches on the ring itself was probably caused by its movement on the bracket. A pommel from grave 104 at Sarre (Kent) (No. 85) also presents a pattern of wear concentrating around the upper parts. It is incised with a mock cloisonné design incorporating a circular garnet with mock beaded wire collar. The top of the collar, together with the incised cells above it, is noticeably worn while the gilding and niello on the opposite face are mostly gone, leaving a dulled surface with cell-work fading towards the top. Another evocative case is a sword from an unnumbered grave at Ash, Gilton (Kent) (No. 90), whose pommel bears a runic inscription. The tops of the runes are erased by wear, the extent of which was calculated and

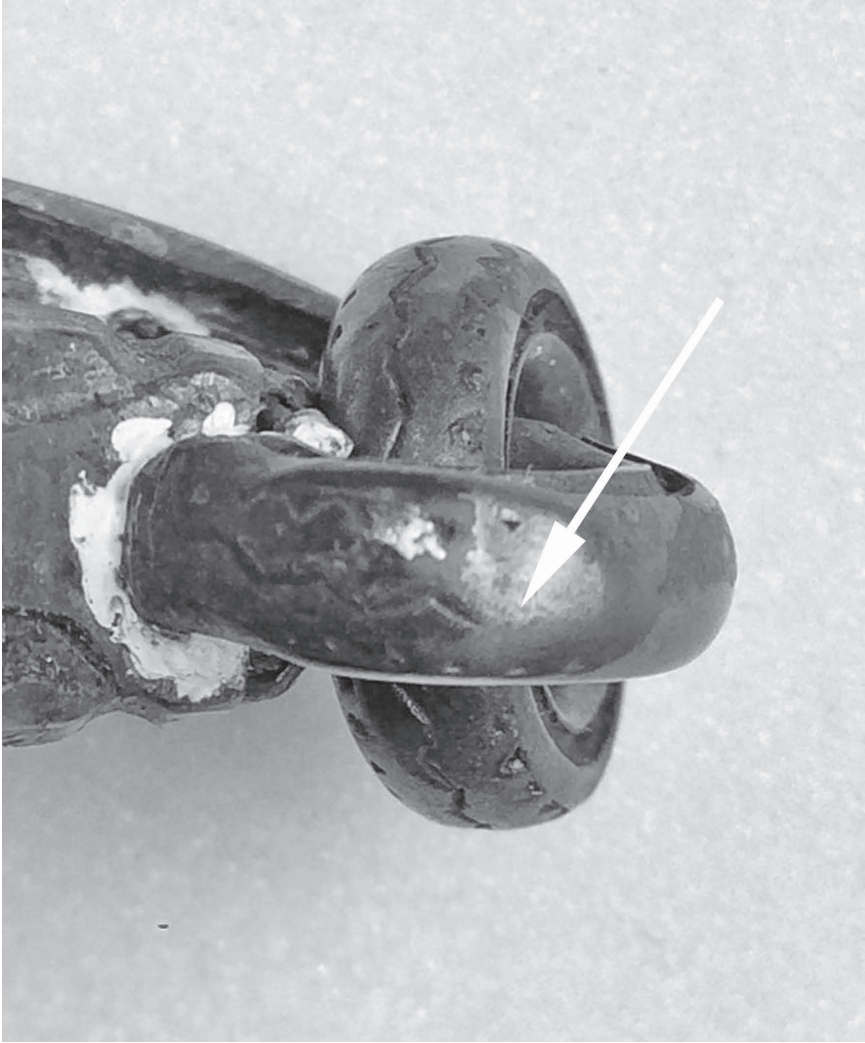


Fig. 22: Ring fitting with worn areas marked. Grave 39, Patrixbourne, Bifrons (Kent) (No. 84). © Maidstone Museum. Kent Archaeological Society Collection

negotiated by Hines in order to reconstruct and interpret the inscription.⁹ Other pommels displaying this wear signature derive from Lower Shorne (No. 86; Fig. 23), grave 105 at Ozengell (No. 87), grave 88 at Sarre (No. 88; Fig. 24), Ash, Gilton grave 56 (No. 89), and an unnumbered grave

⁹ Hines, 'The Early Runic Inscriptions'. As a corrigendum, it should be noted that the accompanying image (and thus the inscription) was printed back-to-front in this publication (pers. comm. John Hines).



Fig. 23: Pommel from Lower Shorne, Kent (No. 86). Left: well-preserved face; right: degraded face with worn area marked.
© Maidstone Museum. Kent Archaeological Society Collection



Fig. 24: Ring fitting with worn areas marked. Grave 88, Sarre (Kent) (No. 88).
© Maidstone Museum. Kent Archaeological Society Collection

at King's Field, Faversham (No. 91; Fig. 25). Experts also noted wear on swords from graves C1081 and C3944 at Saltwood (Kent) (Nos. 92–3).¹⁰

Similar wear patterns occur on contemporaneous Scandinavian swords. The copper-alloy pommel on a sword from boat grave XII at Vendel (Uppland) in Sweden (No. 94) has lost gilding along the upper edge of its broad face, probably due to wear more than corrosion since the latter is not severe. Gilding has also worn from relief knotwork on the top of two sword pommels from boat grave 6 at Valsgårde (Uppland) (Nos. 95–6) and another from Ultuna, Bonkyrko (Uppland) (No. 97), surviving only in recesses around the knots. The impact of this deterioration is

¹⁰ It was not possible to examine these weapons first-hand for this study. The site is unpublished but a report is available (Ager, 'Swords').



Fig. 25: Pommel with worn areas marked. King's Field, Faversham, Kent (No. 91). © Trustees of the British Museum

especially clear when the pommels are viewed from above, revealing a contrast between the bright gold of the narrow pommel shoulders and the duller pommel top (Figs 26–7). Magnification verifies the presence of wear in these cases: the relief interlace on the pommel top appears smoother than the crisp motifs on the shoulders. Similarly, the knot adorning the top of the pommel from grave 5 at Valsgärde (No. 98) appears to have lost some gilding and definition. Display restrictions prevented a complete visual analysis of the ring-sword from boat grave 7 at Valsgärde (No. 99), but it was possible to observe deterioration to the double row of punches bordering the ring-knob, the upper row appearing shallower and less distinct than the lower.¹¹ The ring-sword from boat grave I at Vendel (No. 101) has degraded chip-carved interlace on the outer edge of its ring fitting, contrasting with the very crisp motifs on less protruding parts of the hilt, notably the flat upper surface of the lower guard plate. Lost gilding on the ring-knob attached to a sword from Vallstenarum, Gotland (No. 102) was caused in part by flaking when the copper alloy corroded beneath, but there are hints that wear may have contributed: gold filigree concealing the junction between the upper and lower ‘rings’, on the pommel’s surviving shoulder and around the rivet tubes, has flattened and merged in places (Fig. 33).

The uppermost parts of pommels and protruding features like ring fittings were vulnerable to wear because they were accessible to the hand or the rubbing of clothing when a sword was sheathed at the hip.¹² By contrast, less ‘reachable’ parts of swords are often better preserved. On the ring-sword from Dover, the recessed centre on the ring and its bracket retain their gilding while that on the ring’s outer parts has vanished. Wear patterns thus construct an image of the sword’s owner resting a hand on the pommel habitually, causing it to degrade over time. This scenario is supported by wear to other parts that were regularly touched, including the hand-grip. Gold filigree bands encircling the ends of the grip on a sword from Acklam Wold (North Yorkshire) (No. 103) are so worn in places that the beaded wire resembles a flat strip, its scalloped edges offering a hint of the original beads. The deterioration is worse on the bands’ inner edges, whereas the outer edges, abutting the guards, are better preserved (Fig. 28).¹³ A similar pattern occurs on a sword from Ultuna, Sweden. The inner parts of its broader, more elaborate grip mounts are duller and less crisp than the outer parts, beside the guards. Indeed, it is possible to see where the mounts’ condition changes between its inner and outer halves (Fig. 29). This pattern on the Acklam and Ultuna swords

¹¹ Remarked upon by Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, p. 40.

¹² I am grateful to Paul Mortimer and other early medieval living history groups for discussing their behaviour with swords.

¹³ The grip mounts’ condition is discussed in Ager and Gilmour, ‘Pattern-Welded Anglo-Saxon Sword’.



Fig. 26: Top of pommel with loss of gilding and relief. Boat grave 6, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden (No. 95).
© Sue Brunning. By kind permission of Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum



Fig. 27: Top of pommel with loss of gilding and relief. Ultuna, Bondkyrko, Uppland, Sweden (No. 97).
© The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

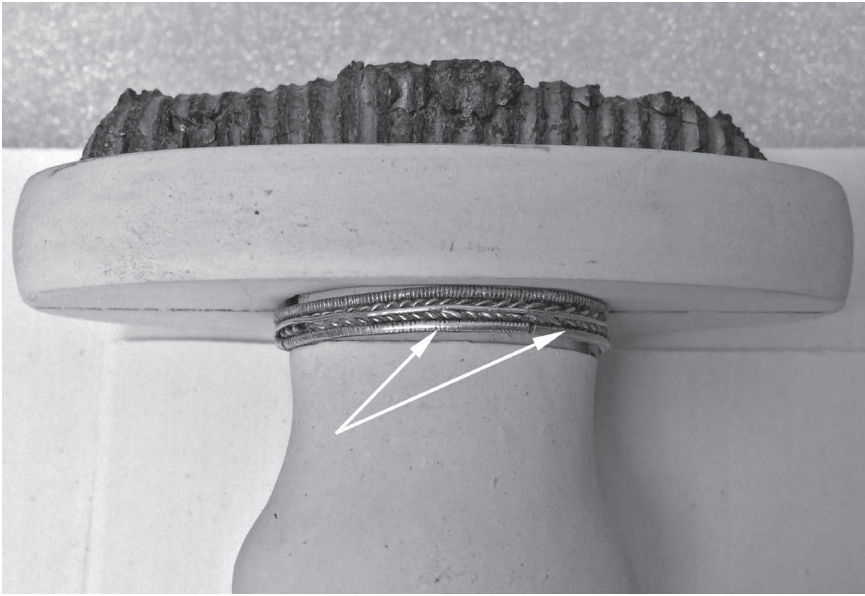


Fig. 28: Grip mount with worn area marked. Acklam Wold, North Yorkshire (No. 103). © York Museums Trust (Yorkshire Museum), accession number 1981.421

makes sense, because the wielder's hand would encircle the inner edges of the grip mounts while the outer parts were shielded by the adjacent guard. The sword from grave I at Vendel expresses the same effect in a slightly different way. Its silver grip casing has three recesses for the wielder's fingers, each one incised with cable motifs. These have lost some gilding and, in places, the definition between the cables' strands – unquestionably caused by fingers resting in these recesses over time (Fig. 30).

Hands and clothing also caused wear to sword guards. Early Anglo-Saxon guards comprised organic blocks that were sometimes sandwiched between thin metal plates, the narrow edges of which are too thin to show much sign of erosion. Scandinavian sword guards, however, could be encased entirely in metal, offering a good hunting ground for wear patterns. The centrepieces of the *Ultuna* sword's guards have lost gilding everywhere but to the sheltered recesses of the incised decoration; the cable ornament running along their midline also appears dull under magnification. These signs contrast with the crisp, brightly gilded appearance of the outer guard plates. The same parts of the guards from boat grave 5 at *Valsgärde* are similarly worn, conveyed by flattened filigree panels along their length.

The wear observed on swords suggests that their wielders interacted with them regularly, not just on the battlefield or as elite trinkets paraded on special occasions. The implication is that swords played a broader



Fig. 29: Grip mounts with worn areas marked. Ultuna, Bondkyrko, Uppland, Sweden (No. 97). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

role in society, necessitating their frequent physical and visual presence at their owners' hips. For instance, swords may have been key to their wielders' identity, be that as a warrior, a leader, a person of high status or any other group. Furthermore, resting a hand upon a pommel, or gripping a hilt, drew attention to the sword's presence and may have helped



Fig. 30: Grip with worn areas marked. Boat grave I, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden (No. 101). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm.
Photo: Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson



Fig. 31: Pommel with inscribed runic letter. King's Field, Faversham (Kent) (No. 91). © Trustees of the British Museum

the wielder to convey pointed messages to onlookers. Such behaviour may also signal a more emotional motivation. The regular wearing of a sword, facilitated by scabbard and sword-belt, may have fuelled a sense of cognitive and bodily fusion between weapon and owner. The weight and long shape of the sword would have influenced its wearer's movements, particularly when negotiating tight spaces, crowds or when sitting down; and given time, perhaps the sword came to seem like an additional limb rather than a separate tool. A sword from King's Field, Faversham (Kent) (No. 91) may encapsulate these more emotive interactions with swords (Figs 25 and 31). Its plain silver pommel is remarkably worn, suggesting that it had been a constant companion: a pair of slashes on one shoulder have almost disappeared and the punched basal border fades towards one end. More remarkable is a single *æsc* ('ash') rune scratched onto one of the pommel's faces, apparently some time after the pommel itself was made.¹⁴ The Old English poem defines the *æsc* rune thus:

*bīþ oferheah, eldum dyre,
stīþ on stāpule, stede rihte hylt,
ðeah him feohtan on fīras monige*

¹⁴ Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, pp. 57–60.

'The ash [tree] is extremely tall, precious to mankind,
strong on its base: it holds its ground as it should,
although many men attack it.'¹⁵

The poem was written down in the tenth century long after the sword was buried, but if the rune's meaning was older, its relevance to a warrior could not be clearer.¹⁶ The rune and wear pattern manifest a profoundly intimate relationship between sword and wielder: someone who habitually touched the pommel until its ornament wore away, and at some moment, felt compelled to scratch a rune into its face – perhaps for inspiration, comfort in battle or protection. Such a reading adds powerful colour to the more pragmatic explanations for wear patterns on swords.

The King's Field pommel illustrates another intriguing phenomenon: the fact that many sword hilts are more degraded on one side than the other. Thus, punched triangles bordering the pommel from Lower Shorne vanish towards the top of one face but continue unbroken on the other, which bears a zoomorphic motif (Fig. 23). Similarly, the garnet-set face of the Sarre 104 pommel degrades towards the top while the opposite face is worn consistently across its surface (Fig. 32).¹⁷ Asymmetrical wear can be explained by wielders sheathing their swords the same way every time, meaning that the same parts of the hilt rubbed against the body while the opposite parts did not. This behaviour was probably not influenced by scabbard design, which enabled most swords to be sheathed either way around;¹⁸ instead, it was a deliberate choice. Pommel design provides a clue. Many early Anglo-Saxon sword pommels have contrasting ornament on their two faces (mirrored in Scandinavia, for instance at Ultuna and Valsgärde). Where differential wear is present, the showier face is usually the better preserved: the garnet-set face on the Sarre pommel, and the zoomorphic face on the Lower Shorne pommel. The implication is that these swords were typically worn with the glitzier face looking outwards, while the plainer face looked inwards where it rubbed against the body.

¹⁵ Maureen Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 29 and 92–3.

¹⁶ Eventually, *æsc* became a metonym for 'spear' in Old English poetry and for 'warship' in Old Norse. It was also combined with other words to create terms for 'warriors', including Old English *æschere* ('ship-army') and Old Norse *askmaðr* ('ship-man' or 'spear-man') (Richard Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 289 and 291; John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout, 2006), p. 283; pers. comm. John Hines). In these cases, 'ash' surely alludes to the wood used to make spear-shafts and ships.

¹⁷ Interestingly, this pommel was deposited loose in the grave, detached from its weapon before burial. The issue of loose fittings is explored further below, pp. 87–8.

¹⁸ Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*, p. 35; pers. comm. Paul Mortimer.



Fig. 32: Pommel from grave 104, Sarre (Kent) (No. 85). © Maidstone Museum.
Kent Archaeological Society Collection

This could reflect a simple desire to show off, but it also hints that the sword itself had an identity, something like a ‘public face’ that should be displayed for others to see and recognise.

Modification

Changes made to a sword's original form imply that it was relatively long-lived, at least long enough for alterations to become necessary or desirable.¹⁹ Typical modifications comprise the addition or removal of fittings, and the adaptation of existing ones. One of the most visible changes made to swords of this period concerns the fixing or detachment of ring fittings – a process that could happen multiple times during a sword's lifetime. Regular swords were converted into ring-swords by piercing, cutting or filing the pommel to accommodate the distinctive interlocking rings or ring-knob. If done well, the modification can be difficult to spot: Evison, for instance, believed that the ring on the sword from Buckland, Dover was a later addition because its decorative style and niello composition varied from that of the pommel.²⁰ Elsewhere, the adaptation is obvious – demonstrated to spectacular effect by a sword from Vallstenarum, Gotland. During this weapon's existence (which may have been lengthy),²¹ one end of its gold cloisonné pommel was demolished to accept a huge, gilded copper-alloy ring-knob.²² The result is visually jarring but the work was carefully done: the modifier cut away one complete cell on both faces of the pommel, leaving the adjacent cells intact, while on the shoulder, the uppermost cell was preserved while the rest were removed, along with the filigree border, leaving empty channels where they had once been (Fig. 33).

Holes in pommel shoulders are the scars left behind by rings that had been lost or removed prior to a sword's burial. These occur on a rune-inscribed pommel from Ash, Gilton (Kent) (No. 90; Fig. 34) and another from Sarre (Kent, grave 91: No. 104), the latter further scarred with gouges probably caused by the rattle of a ring. Curious features on other pommels may also represent the ghost of former ring fittings. One from grave 56 at Ash, Gilton (Kent) has two rivets on one side but three on the other, perhaps all that remains of a ring bracket, while the sword from Petersfinger (Wiltshire), grave XXI (No. 105) is missing a rivet entirely here, leaving a suggestive notch that has been credited to a lost ring.²³ The Lower Shorne pommel has a similar feature with a similar interpretation:²⁴ a 'channel' has been filed between the rivet-holders at one end, squaring

¹⁹ A process outlined evocatively by Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, p. 26.

²⁰ Evison, *Dover*, pp. 22 and 45.

²¹ Nerman Birger, *Die Vendelzeit Gotlands: Im Auftrage der Kungl. Vitterhets-, historie- och antikvitets akademien dargestellt, Band 1:1 – Text* (Stockholm, 1975), p. 45.

²² Birgit Arrhenius, *Merovingian Garnet Jewellery: Emergence and Social Implications* (Stockholm, 1985), p. 145; Birgit Arrhenius, 'Svärdsknappen från Vallstenarum på Gotland', *Fornvännen* 65 (1970), pp. 193–209 at pp. 193–5.

²³ Edward Thurlow Leeds and Hugh de Sausmarez Shortt, *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Petersfinger, near Salisbury, Wilts* (Salisbury, 1953), pp. 53–4.

²⁴ Evison, 'The Dover Ring-Sword', pp. 69–70.

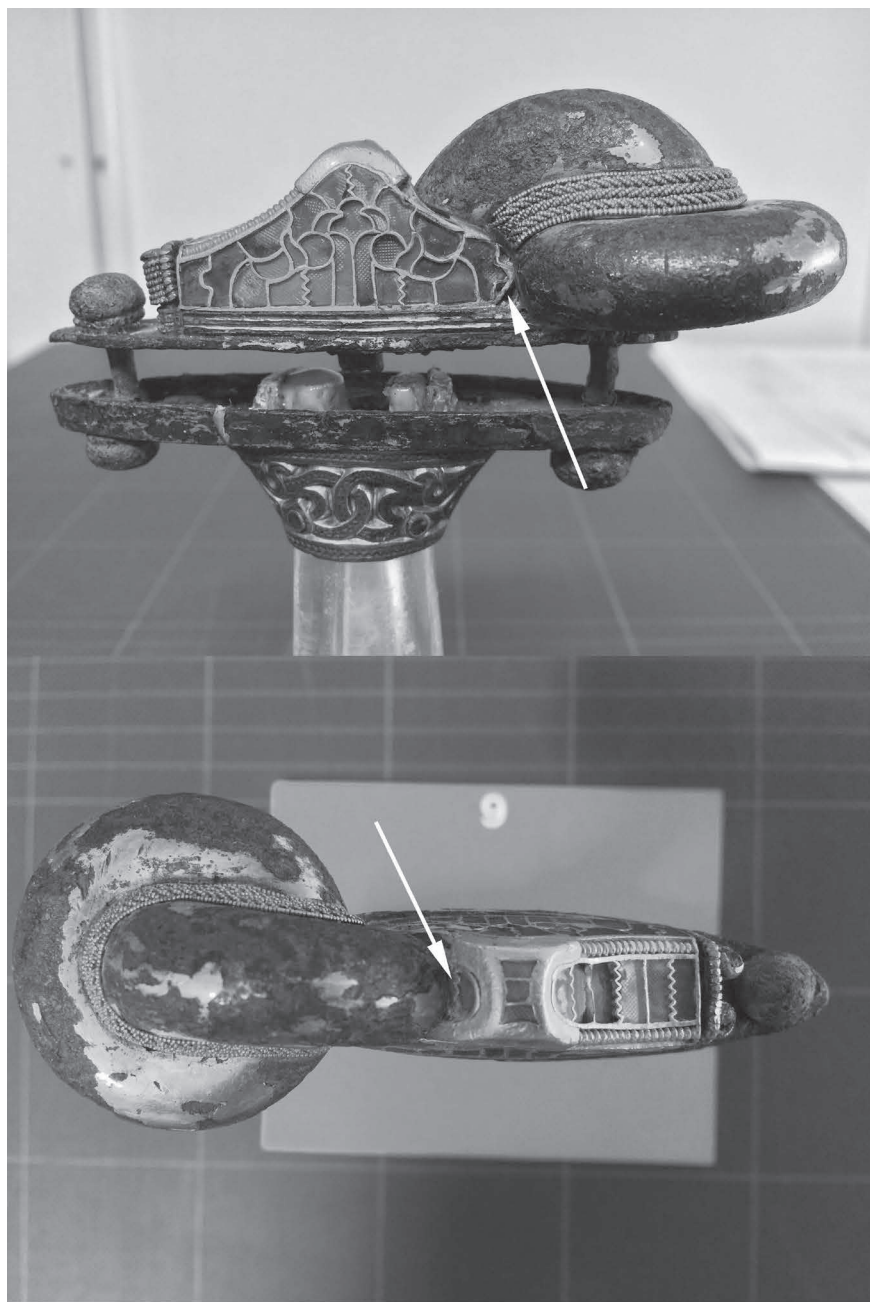


Fig. 33: Hilt with secondary ring fitting with cutaway cells marked. Vallstenarum, Gotland, Sweden (No. 102). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm



Fig. 34: Pommel with hole for a ring fitting. Ash, Gilton (Kent) (No. 90). © National Museums Liverpool (World Museum), accession no. M6402

off their inner edges, while scratches around the rivet-holders, similar to those on the Sarre pommel, hint at damage from a free-running ring. A sword from Coombe, Woodnesborough (Kent) (No. 106), discussed in detail below, may once have carried a ring, based on an odd headless rivet on its upper guard and a strange plain ledge on one pommel shoulder. Indeed, a ring was recorded when the sword was excavated in the nineteenth century, but its whereabouts are now unknown.²⁵

Ring fittings have been interpreted persuasively as markers of oaths sworn by warriors to their lords, their addition and removal mirroring the stages of a warrior's career: perhaps the moment when the oath was first sworn and when it later expired, either through contravention, supersession or when the swearer died and passed his sword to another who did not bear the same obligation (see pp. 11, 78–81). Other social and cultural concerns may also have played a role. The Vallstenarum pommel was probably a Continental import to Sweden, but its ring-knob was more Scandinavian in flavour, suggesting that its owner wished to make the weapon more culturally relevant, or cosmopolitan, in its local setting.²⁶ The irreversible mutilation of this unquestionably costly piece hints at a deeper motivation than simple embellishment. The mobility of ring fittings points towards an intersection of identities between swords and their owners, the weapon becoming an active messenger, or embodiment, of its bearer's life history, status, relationships and viewpoints.

Grips formed another locus for customisation. The worn gold grip bands decorating the Acklam Wold sword may have been later additions, as their decorative style has a longer chronology than the form of the pommel with which they are paired.²⁷ The varied mounts on the Vallstenarum grip seem not to have been an original partnership either:²⁸ an unusual curved mount of gold garnet cloisonné literally and figuratively sticks out against the chunky, gilded silver mounts abutting each guard. Its materials and cell shapes are a better match with the pommel, perhaps hinting that these two components were part of a different (older?) hilt configuration which was later combined with the silver grip mounts. Certainly, the latter show little sign of wear despite their vulnerable location, the punches on the interlacing beasts appearing crisp without the tell-tale fading seen on many other swords (Fig. 35). The Sutton Hoo sword (No. 79) also combines a heavily worn pommel with fresher-looking grip mounts. These fragile gold plaques are decorated with very fine filigree which retains much of its integrity, showing only minor signs of wear. Scientific analysis in 1978 established that the grip mounts' gold content was lower than that of the

²⁵ Evison, *Dover*, p. 307; Ellis Davidson and Webster, 'Anglo-Saxon Burial', pp. 22–4.

²⁶ Pers. comm. John Ljungkvist, Uppsala University.

²⁷ Ager and Gilmour, 'Pattern-Welded Anglo-Saxon Sword'.

²⁸ Pers. comm. John Ljungkvist, Uppsala University.

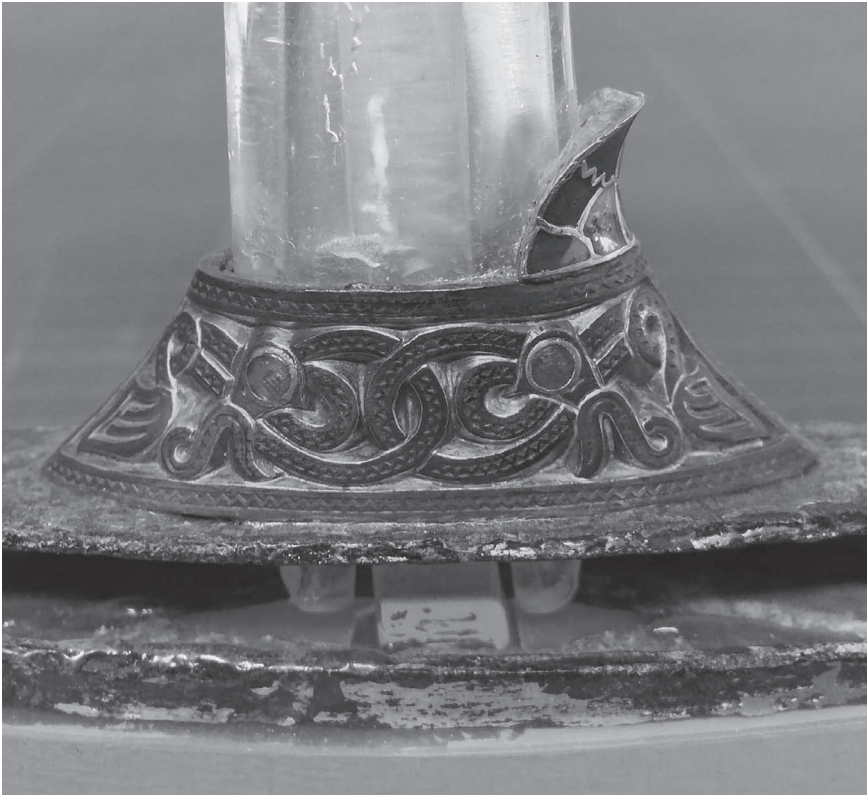


Fig. 35: Grip mounts. Vallstenarum, Gotland, Sweden (No. 102). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

pommel and guards,²⁹ raising the possibility that they had been made separately and were added later to the hilt. In 2016, however, a rerun of the analysis returned more similar results for the various parts³⁰ – casting doubt on the theory, but not ruling it out altogether. The grip mounts may have been made, but not necessarily mounted, at the same time as the other pieces; or they may have been produced later using the same cache of gold. Certainly, their crispness, when viewed beside the much-degraded pommel, whispers of a different history.

²⁹ M. J. Hughes, M. R. Cowell, W. A. Oddy and A. E. A. Werner, 'Report on the Analysis of the Gold of the Sutton Hoo Jewellery and Some Comparative Material', *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial, Volume II: Arms, Armour and Regalia*, ed. Rupert Leo Smith Bruce-Mitford (London, 1978), pp. 618–25.

³⁰ Harriet White, 'Scientific Examination of the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 Sword Hilt (1939,1010.19–25)', British Museum Department of Conservation and Scientific Research, Internal Science Report PR07533-30 (2016).

Another hallmark of modified swords is the 'Frankenstein effect', in which successive adaptations over time created swords with fittings of mismatching types, metals and decorative styles. For instance, a sword from grave 31 at Brighthampton (Oxfordshire) (No. 107) has been described as an 'archaeological puzzle', uniting fitments from the later fifth to earlier sixth centuries, and from both England and Scandinavia.³¹ Grave 22 at Blacknall Field, Pewsey (Wiltshire) (No. 108) contained a sword with fittings spanning several generations, while the stylistic disharmony between pommel and scabbard mouth-band on the weapon from grave XXI at Petersfinger hints that a younger sword was paired with an older scabbard.³² The Coombe sword, mentioned earlier, combines a nielloed silver pommel with Salin's Style I (or early Style II) animal ornament with gilded copper-alloy grip mounts featuring geometric interlace; the latter may even have been altered to better match the pommel's zoomorphs.³³ 'Frankenstein' weapons were not peculiar to the Anglo-Saxons: the sword from Vallstenarum, discussed above, is a graphic Scandinavian example.

Interestingly, there seems to have been generally little concern to 'blend in' alterations, fill in any scars or smooth out any blemishes; instead they were left for all to see. It seems that the physical signs of a sword's age were not a source of shame or embarrassment, as wrinkles and grey hairs can be for modern human beings: instead, they were desirable, like badges of honour – reflexive of prestige rather than a sign that a weapon was 'past it'. Indeed, antiquity may have been such a desirable quality that it was conferred upon swords that had yet to earn it through the grinding of years. A weapon from grave 47 at Blacknall Field, Pewsey may have had its scabbard refurbished not with new metal edgings, but old and damaged ones of an earlier type: perhaps for want of something else, but possibly deliberately (No. 109).³⁴ Evison argued that a sword from King's Field, Faversham (No. 110) was fitted with an older ring since it resembled that on an earlier sword from Snartemo, Vest-Agder in Norway.³⁵ Fischer even claimed that some ring types were made deliberately in an archaic style, aping old swords without actually being old themselves.³⁶ Even fittings which look fresh may not always signal a brand new weapon.

³¹ Tania M. Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames Region, and Their Bearing on the History of Wessex, circa AD 400–700', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford (1977), pp. 257–63.

³² F. Ken Annable and Bruce N. Eagles, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Blacknall Field, Pewsey, Wiltshire* (Devizes, 2010), pp. 8ff; Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites', p. 257; cf. Hines, 'Grave Finds', p. 194.

³³ Ager, 'Swords'; Evison, 'Sword Rings', p. 308; but cf. Ellis Davidson and Webster, 'Anglo-Saxon Burial', p. 32, who argue that the stylistic divergence could indicate a date during the transition between Style I and II ornament.

³⁴ Annable and Eagles, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery*, pp. 10–11.

³⁵ Evison, 'The Dover Ring-Sword', p. 73.

³⁶ Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, p. 24.

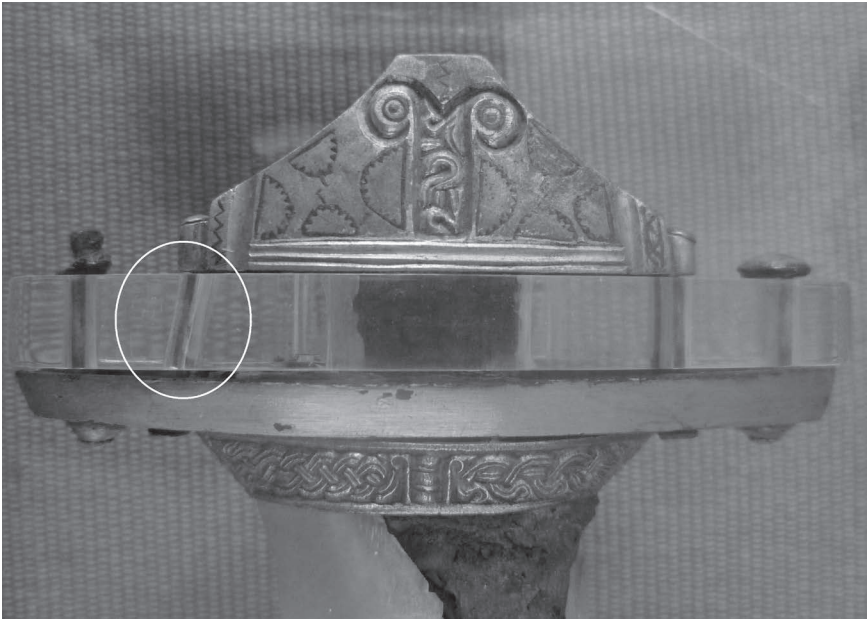


Fig. 36: Hilt with bent attachment rivet marked. Coombe, Woodnesborough (Kent) (No. 106). © Saffron Walden Museum

The Coombe sword's 'pristine' pommel³⁷ may be thick with gilding and niello, even in wear 'hotspots' like the top and shoulders; but its hilt construction hints at a longer history. One of the rivets fixing the pommel to the upper guard has been bent to make the connection, while the other rivet is straight; and the pommel's position on the guard is off-centre by a few millimetres (Fig. 36). One reading is that the pommel and guard did not start life together but were combined from different sources. As Ellis Davidson and Webster stated, and as this study re-emphasises, pommels were especially prone to wear and would require regular refurbishment, meaning that a fresh-looking pommel may not always signify a young sword, but rather an older one with a newer fitting.

Some modifications may have been motivated by the need to replace decrepit parts or a desire to keep up with fashions, but the mobility of ring fittings hints that deeper social, cultural and political concerns also fuelled this behaviour. Perhaps, like rings, other modifications took place in step with a wielder's career: a victory commemorated with an equipment upgrade; a ceremonial occasion in which he participated; and in the end, his death and funeral.³⁸ In this way, modifications may have recorded and

³⁷ Ellis Davidson and Webster, 'Anglo-Saxon Burial', pp. 23–4.

³⁸ Pers. comm. John Worley, Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum; D.

celebrated a partnership between a sword and its wielder(s) over time, the duration itself playing an important role.

Refurbishment

Refurbishments reflect a deliberate choice to keep a damaged sword in use rather than to retire it, posing questions about circulation and concepts of value. A small group of repaired swords were identified in this study, divisible into two broad categories. The first is running repairs, to patch up minor damage or deterioration. Scabbards were the focus of this attention, battered by the repeated drawing and sheathing of sharp blades over time. One of the metal edge reinforcers on a scabbard from Collingbourne Ducis (Wiltshire) (No. 111) is shorter than the other but has been lengthened with an additional piece, perhaps as a repair.³⁹ An edge reinforcer on the sword from Blacknall Field, Pewsey, grave 47, may also have been mended. It has an extra rivet-hole at one end, smaller than the two central rivets; the hole also pierces a decorated part of the object whereas the central ones were made through a plain section. The extra hole may have been made to brace the edging's fitment. The mouth-band on a scabbard from Saltwood, grave C3826 (No. 112), may have been repaired, while another from King's Field, Faversham (No. 113) was added to shore up split wooden boards beneath.⁴⁰ A repair may also explain a subtle anomaly on the Sutton Hoo sword pommel. Each of its garnet inlays has a gold foil backing decorated with a four-by-four grid, except for one, which is three-by-three – most probably representing a replacement for a lost inlay.⁴¹

Scandinavian examples show how difficult it can be to identify repairs securely. Arwidsson viewed a bark and fabric wrapping around the top of the scabbard from Valsgårde, grave 8, as a renovation, but Cameron linked it to a trend in late sixth- to early seventh-century England for binding scabbards with textile tape, a practical feature relating to sword suspension.⁴² The popularity of textile scabbard bindings in England and

R. J. Perkins, 'The Jutish Cemetery at Sarre Revisited: A Rescue Evaluation', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 109 (1991), pp. 139–66 at pp. 152–3 and n. 19.

³⁹ C. J. Gingell, 'The Excavation of an Early Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Collingbourne Ducis, Wilts', *Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Magazine* 70/71 (1975–6), pp. 61–98 at p. 71.

⁴⁰ Ager, 'Swords'; Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*, p. 85.

⁴¹ Katherine East, 'A Study of the Cross-Hatched Foils from Sutton Hoo', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 4 (1985), pp. 129–42; White, 'Scientific Examination', p. 9 and figs 7–8.

⁴² Arwidsson, *Valsgårde* 8, pp. 61–3; Esther A. Cameron, 'Scabbards of Swords', *Saltwood Funerary Landscape: Early Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, ed. Barry Ager, Esther A. Cameron, Stephanie Spain and Ian Riddler, unpublished site report, CTRL Integrated Site Report Series (2016), pp. 14–18.

its appearance on other Scandinavian swords⁴³ may thus reflect fashion rather than a similar refurbishment method; but a less ambiguous repair occurs on the sword from Valsgärde 6, whose broken upper guard was mended with a copper-alloy plate.⁴⁴

The second category of repairs is more dramatic: the reshaping of broken blades. The average two-edged early Anglo-Saxon sword measured around 900mm from tip to pommel, so swords of considerably shorter length may represent reshaped breakages. A weapon from grave 27 at Buckland, Dover is just 660mm long (No. 118); furthermore, its pattern-welding continues all the way to the tip, lacking the typical plain 'border' formed by the cutting edges. Evison concluded that the blade had been refashioned after a break,⁴⁵ although Gilmour has shown that blades could be pattern-welded edge-to-edge, shown by the intricate weapon from grave C3944 at Saltwood.⁴⁶ Further research, using specialist techniques, could help disentangle the intentions behind curiously short swords, but the notion that an owner might go to great lengths to keep a broken blade is instructive. The most pragmatic reading is simple economics: a sword's owner could not afford to replace the costliest part of his weapon; but this seems naive in light of the substantial evidence for sword curation discussed earlier in this chapter. Such radical repairs must have compromised a sword's combat efficacy, and thus its retention offers yet further proof that swords were valued far beyond their role as weapons. That value may have grown out of a sword's place in a network, perhaps a warrior group linked by the processes behind the exchange of ring fittings, or a family or kinship group who used the sword as an heirloom linking generations. The value may also have existed in the manifestations of a sword's antiquity, articulated above. These suggestions are not mutually exclusive, and indeed may have combined with each other and other factors to create a cumulative value for these weapons.

* * *

The thread weaving through the practice of sword curation is the notion of physical and emotional intimacy between sword and wielder. The actions and experiences of the latter shaped, both literally and metaphorically, the former, whose form logged and echoed those same actions and experiences. Some swords may have become authentic mirrors of their owner's history, while others may have been manipulated to construct an ideal record. Nonetheless, the identities of artefact and owner could become entwined and mutually reliant. Such concepts offer an interpreta-

⁴³ Elmelunde and Melsted-Sandhuset, grave 16, on Bornholm, Denmark (Nos. 115–16; possibly Stora and Lille Ihre, Hellvi grave 481 (No. 117), on Gotland, Sweden.

⁴⁴ Greta Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 6* (Uppsala and Stockholm, 1942), pp. 46–7.

⁴⁵ Evison, *Dover*, p. 222.

⁴⁶ Gilmour, 'Ethnic Identity', figs 1a:1–2.

tive framework for the Staffordshire Hoard, arguably the most significant discovery of early medieval swords ever made. The assemblage, found by metal-detecting in 2009, contains hundreds of pommel caps, guard plates, scabbard fittings and other paraphernalia collected together and buried in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia some time in the later seventh century.⁴⁷ Individual sword fittings had been found before, representing both casual losses and the remains of burials. Others were converted into jewellery, like a pendant made from a pyramidal scabbard mount in grave 58 at Northbourne, Finglesham (Kent),⁴⁸ or retained as keepsakes, tokens or amulets, like a pommel in a woman's pouch in grave 360 at Buckland, Dover.⁴⁹ Loose pommels in graves 91 and 104 at Sarre have been read as shorthand for whole swords that were passed down, a plausible suggestion in light of discussions here.⁵⁰ The Staffordshire Hoard initially seems to present a different prospect. The circumstances of its composition and burial are an unsolvable mystery, albeit ripe with theories. The amount of precious metals involved has naturally raised the possibility that the Hoard's contents were destined for re-use or recycling via the melting pot. However, the notion of entwined identities for swords and their owners offers a more sinister interpretation. During the seventh century, Mercia was warring successfully with surrounding kingdoms under the leadership of aggressive kings like Penda.⁵¹ The Hoard could comprise tribute or battle spoils seized during these conflicts and left in the ground as a ritual offering or sacrifice – mirroring earlier mass depositions of war-gear at wetland sites like Kragehul and Illerup Ådal in Denmark.⁵² If so, such destruction of swords could reflect an attempt to obliterate a defeated foe – disfiguring, dishonouring and tearing apart sword and owner alike, divesting highly charged weapons of the trappings of their identity which linked them so closely with their human wielders, and in so doing, conferring a final and permanent defeat.⁵³ Such a reading would

⁴⁷ Hines, 'Matters of Material'; Martin O. H. Carver, 'The Staffordshire (Ogley Hay) Hoard: The Find, the Context, the Problems', *Antiquity* 85 (2011), p. 201; Leahy and Bland, *Staffordshire Hoard*; Leslie Webster, Christopher Spary-Green, Patrick Périn and Catherine Hills, 'The Staffordshire (Ogley Hay) Hoard: Problems of Interpretation', *Antiquity* 85 (2011), pp. 221–9.

⁴⁸ Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and Guy Grainger, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Finglesham, Kent* (Oxford, 2006), p. 63.

⁴⁹ Ken Parfitt and Trevor Anderson, *Buckland Anglo-Saxon Cemetery, Dover: Excavations 1994* (Canterbury, 2012), p. 49.

⁵⁰ Hawkes and Page, 'Swords and Runes', pp. 2–3 and n. 2.

⁵¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book II.20, trans. Leo Sherley Price, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, revised edn (Harmondsworth, 1990).

⁵² The various options are outlined lucidly by Hines, 'Matters of Material'.

⁵³ See Carmen Lange, 'Violence and the Face', *Material Harm: Archaeological Studies of War and Violence*, ed. John Carman (Glasgow, 1997), pp. 167–73 at pp. 167–8, for the connection between destroying an object that represents a person and destroying the person him/herself. These ideas also intersect with discussions of the 'ritual killing' of swords, which normally focus upon bent blades such

place the Staffordshire Hoard among the most powerful evidence we have for perceptions of early medieval swords.

Swords and Their Wielders

Attitudes towards swords are conveyed not only by the weapons themselves but also by the contexts in which they are found. In the early Anglo-Saxon period, these contexts are primarily furnished burials. The arrangement of artefacts in graves has been likened to a tableau, meaningfully composed by mourners to articulate messages about the deceased that onlookers could read and remember.⁵⁴ The location of swords within these tableaux yields many clues about how the weapons were perceived. This information has not always been recorded, particularly in excavations undertaken before the mid-twentieth century. Poor bone preservation can require a sword's position to be surmised from the layout of other artefacts in the grave, or through comparison with other burial tableaux; and in some cases, internal collapse or intervention from animals or humans has disturbed the original grave design. However, when these problems are accounted for, it is possible to observe intriguing trends within the studied graves.

Swords in the Burial Tableau

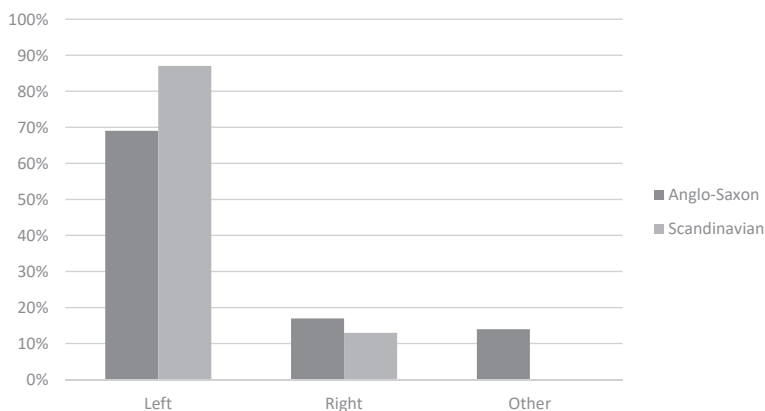
In the early medieval North, swords were usually placed on the proper left side of the deceased. In early Anglo-Saxon England, this is true for more than two-thirds of swords where the body side is recorded; in Scandinavia the number is greater still (Graph 7). Here the sample is small but its character confirms that left-hand positioning was significant and deliberate.⁵⁵ For instance, the deceased in boat grave 7 at Valsgärde was flanked by swords, but in the other Swedish boat graves swords were placed on the left – including both swords in grave 6 at Valsgärde and grave I at Vendel.⁵⁶ This pattern could occur if the dead wore their

as that from Kyndby, Sjælland, Denmark (No. 119), but could profitably be applied to loose sword fittings too.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Death and Memory*, especially pp. 30–9 and pp. 118–19.

⁵⁵ Recently Swedish archaeologists have queried whether intact individuals were buried at Valsgärde, which would complicate understanding of the swords' placement in these graves: Gunilla Larsson, *Ship and Society: Maritime Ideology in Late Iron Age Sweden* (Uppsala, 2007); and Museum Gustavianum Research Group, *Valsgärde 1, 2 and 4*, Valsgärde Studies (Uppsala, 2013), p. 129.

⁵⁶ Pers. comm. John Worley, Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum; Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, pp. 16–18; Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 6*, Taf. 44; Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 8*, Taf. 43. At Vendel, positioning is an informed estimate due to the lack of skeletal material; the possibility of two individuals buried here cannot be excluded: Greta Arwidsson, 'Valsgärde', *Vendel Period Studies: Transactions of*



Graph 7: Placement of swords in burials, relative to the deceased's body side

swords in the grave, as suggested for several burials at Buckland, Dover;⁵⁷ but this seems not to have been a widespread custom as most swords are found with the hilt at the shoulder rather than the hip. Another explanation is simply convention, enshrined after generations of repetition. But why choose the left over the right side? Perhaps mourners favoured the side on which swords were worn in life, even if the weapon was not worn physically in the grave. If so, these tableaux may convey messages about the dead person's handedness. Swords were worn on one side (usually the left) and wielded on the other because their length demanded they be drawn diagonally across the body to clear the scabbard, by contrast with the shorter Roman *gladius* which was worn and drawn on the same side.⁵⁸ Only one or two early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries favoured right-hand sword placement in the grave, including Shepherdsweil with Coldred I in Sibertswold (Kent), and, possibly, the mound cemetery at Sutton Hoo.⁵⁹ This may represent a local tradition, but could also indicate a left-handed kinship group in the cemetery's community. Indeed, the sword from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo offers compelling evidence that handedness influenced the siting of swords in burials. Like other swords discussed above, its cloisonné pommel is asymmetrically worn, with flattened fili-

the *Boat-Grave Symposium in Stockholm, February 2–3 1981*, ed. Jan Peder Lamm and Hans-Åke Nordström (Stockholm, 1983), pp. 71–82 at p. 73.

⁵⁷ Evison, *Dover*, p. 21; Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*, pp. 11–12.

⁵⁸ M. C. Bishop, *The Gladius: The Roman Short Sword* (Oxford, 2016), p. 48.

⁵⁹ Andrew Richardson, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of Kent, Volume I*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 391 (Oxford, 2005), p. 335; *Novum Inventorium Sepulchrale: Kentish Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods in the Sonia Hawkes Archive*, July 2007, 1st edn, <http://web.arch.ox.ac.uk/archives/inventorium/> (accessed 18 January 2011); Martin O. H. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground and Its Context* (London, 2005).

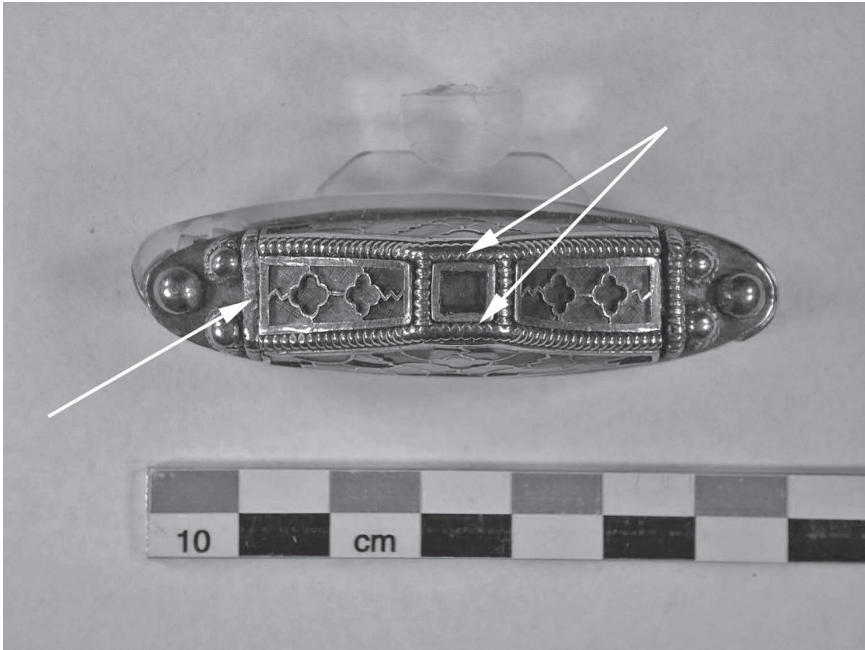
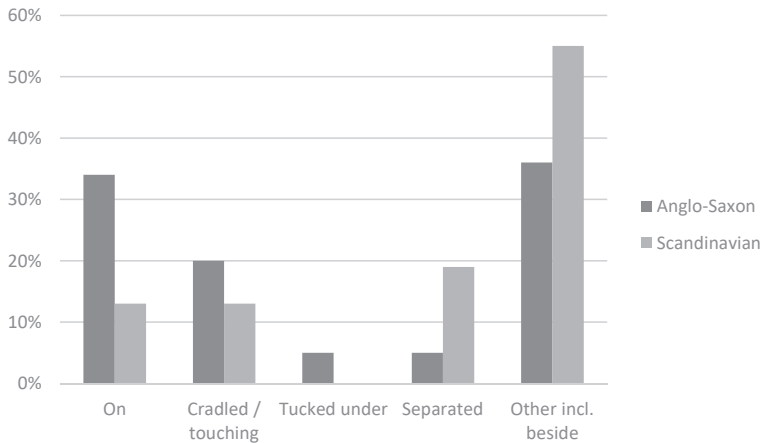


Fig. 37: Pommel with worn areas marked. Mound 1, Sutton Hoo (Suffolk) (No. 79). © Trustees of the British Museum

gree on one shoulder and terminal only (Fig. 37). Its two broad faces also bear different designs, one made subtly more complex by the inclusion of a central cross-shaped cell. If the wielder had been right-handed and wore the sword on the left, with the worn pommel shoulder upwards where the hand would rest on it, the complex pommel face would have looked inwards rather than outwards – contravening the pattern established by other pommels in this study. The wear and ornament *do* correlate, however, if the sword was worn on the right – signalling that its wielder was left-handed. The burial tableau may corroborate this theory. While no human remains were found, a void indicates the body's likely position. Assuming the sword was placed point-downwards beside the deceased (as was typical), its location confirms that it lay on the right rather than the left-hand side.⁶⁰

Another pattern in sword placement suggests that more emotional concerns may sometimes have influenced the fitting out of graves. Swords were almost always placed in direct physical contact with the body (Graph 8): usually immediately beside it, but a third were completely or

⁶⁰ Angela Evans, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, revised edn (London, 1994), fig. 18.



Graph 8: Proximity of swords in burials, relative to the deceased

partially on it; a fifth were touching, being touched by or even cradled by the body; and a few were apparently tucked beneath a limb. This proximity is echoed in crouched burials in northern England, in which swords were laid along the front or back of the body. Scandinavian graves show a similar trend. Most swords appear beside the body; over a tenth were touching, being touched by or cradled by the dead; and the same amount rested on them in some way. Since most Anglo-Saxon graves comprised smallish, rectangular grave cuts, swords would inevitably end up beside the body in some way – but mourners had choices within those constraints: they could divide the sword from the body with another weapon or grave feature, as in graves 93 and 96 at Buckland, Dover (Nos. 120–1) in which swords were placed outside of a seax and spear respectively; and in graves 682 (Cemetery II) at Mucking (Essex) and 275 at Sarre (Nos. 122–3),⁶¹ where swords were outside of coffins. In fact, such instances are rare. In most burials, swords are always directly beside (or on) the dead and, where present, inside the coffin with them.⁶²

The deliberateness of this collocation is clearest where mourners had more space to work with but still paired the sword with the dead, as in the large burials at Sutton Hoo (Mounds 1 and 17, Nos. 79 and 124), Taplow (Buckinghamshire, No. 125) and Caenby (Lincolnshire, No. 126), paralleled in the Scandinavian boat burials of Uppland. The chamber

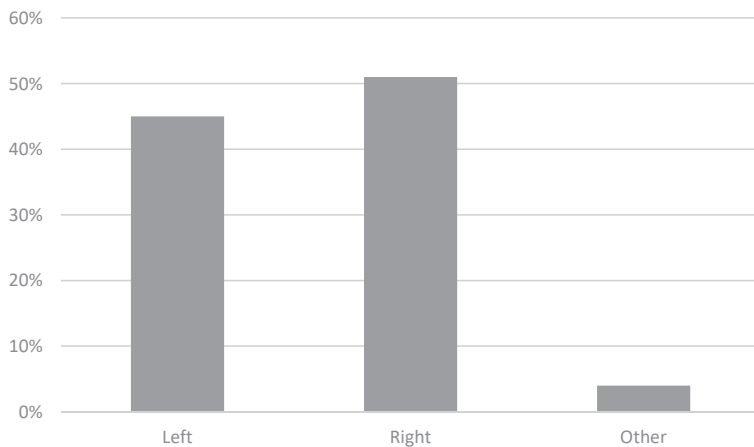
⁶¹ Perkins, 'Jutish Cemetery', p. 146.

⁶² The grave plan for the barrow burial at Tissington (Derbyshire) shows the sword placed horizontally in the skull area (No. 127), but the burial may have been disturbed by the roots of a tree directly above it. The excavation, undertaken in the nineteenth century, was also patchily recorded: John F. Lucas, 'Notice of the Opening of a Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Grave Mound at Tissington', *Reliquary* 5 (1865), pp. 165–9.

grave at Prittlewell (Essex) offers a very rare exception: here the sword was not only outside of the coffin but also perpendicular to it, creating a visual and physical separation from the deceased (No. 128). In this case, the sword's highly unusual placement may be explained by the way in which the burial tableau was structured to accommodate, in a novel way, traditional symbols of social identity and markers of Christian belief at the dawn of English Christianity: something explored closely in a forthcoming publication.⁶³

The conscious pairing of sword and dead is verified by a comparison with spears. Spears were considerably more mobile than swords in burial tableaux, showing no strong connection to a body side but appearing in roughly equal measure on both left and right (Graph 9), hinting perhaps that mourners were less concerned to evoke handedness via this weapon. Almost half of spears with a recorded position were separated from the body by a grave feature or another weapon (Graph 10), that weapon being a sword in most cases. Where coffins were present, spears were more often outside of them than in, and only in two cases were they cradled in the arm of the deceased.⁶⁴ This pattern recurs again in Scandinavia.

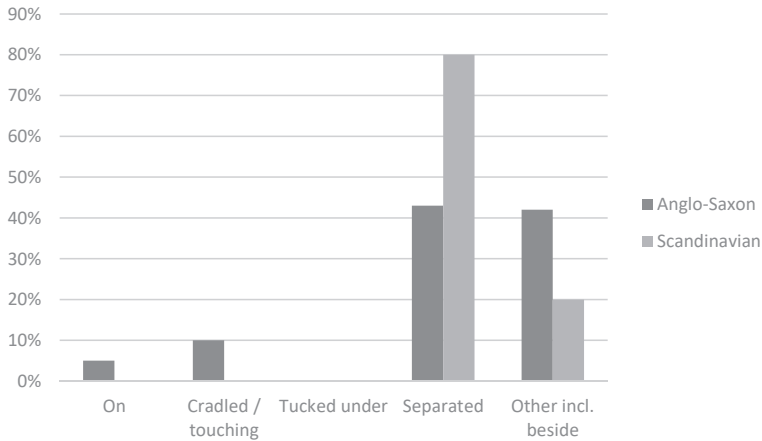
The overall impression conveyed by this survey is that the placement of swords, particularly its proximity to the deceased, was of great importance to those fitting out graves. Swords 'outranked' or displaced spears



Graph 9: Placement of spears in Anglo-Saxon burials, relative to the deceased's body side

⁶³ Lyn Blackmore, Ian Blair, Sue Hirst and Christopher Scull, *The Prittlewell Princely Burial: Excavations at Priory Crescent, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, 2003* (London, 2019). I am grateful to Chris Scull for discussion of this point.

⁶⁴ Grave 47, Blacknall Field, Pewsey, Wiltshire and grave XXI, Petersfinger, Wiltshire.



Graph 10: Proximity of spears in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian burials, relative to the deceased

in the tableaux, taking pride of place beside the dead and perhaps on an equal par, as the centrepiece of the display. The implication is that swords were viewed as the deceased person's primary attribute, a notion shared by mourners, onlookers and the dead alike. The regular carrying of swords, resulting in their worn condition described above, meant that mourners would have grown accustomed to seeing sword and wielder together, and consequently may have been keen to enshrine their companionship in the grave. This more personal connection is evoked by tableaux in which the dead cradles the sword or reaches out to touch it (Fig. 38), especially since this posture required a friend or family member to climb into the grave and enfold the sword within their loved one's arm. The uniquely intense partnership between sword and wielder is perhaps conveyed most strongly by these eternal embraces.

Women and Swords

The presence of a sword in an early Anglo-Saxon burial used to be taken as a sign that the occupant was male. However, growing awareness of 'cross-gendered' burials means that binary views of gender exist on borrowed time (see p. 9). According to their records, the sword graves analysed in this study are overwhelmingly male in sex – but this says very little since most were sexed by grave goods rather than osteological analysis. It is easy to feel that one cannot say anything meaningful about such data when any one of these 'males' could in fact be a biological female (quite apart from the issue of individuals identifying as a gender other than their biological sex). Today these themes are receiving timely attention and will unspool further in years to come; but for now, the present study

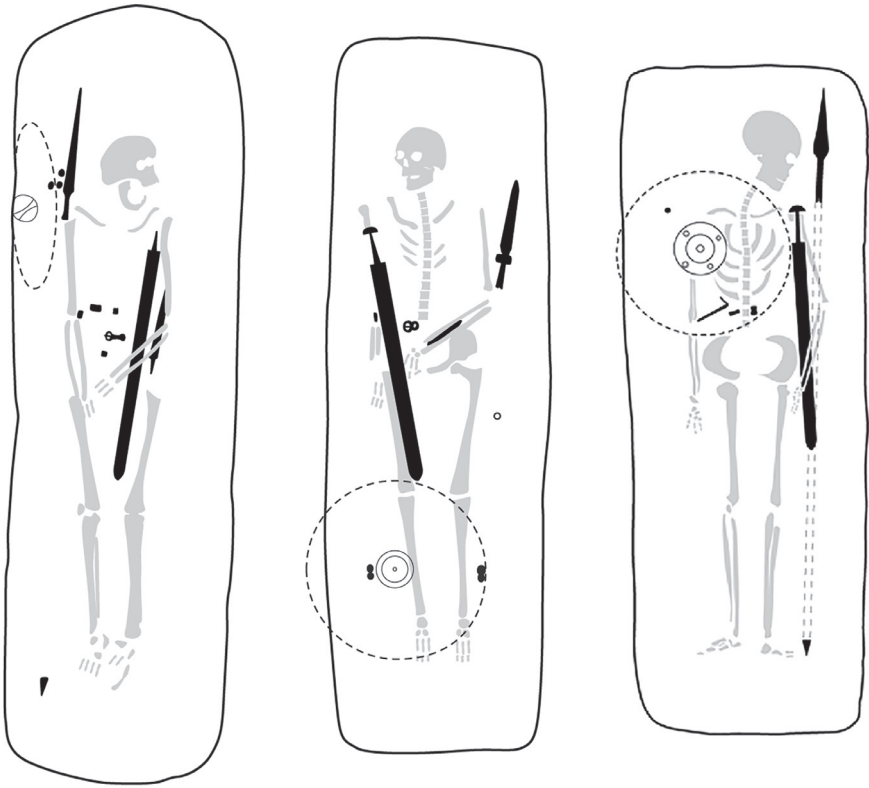


Fig. 38: Swords cradled or touched in the grave. (a) Grave 56, Buckland, Dover (Kent). (b) Grave 71, Buckland, Dover (Kent). (c) Grave 20, Petersfinger, Wiltshire. By Craig Williams, after Evison, *Dover and Leeds and Shortt, Anglo-Saxon Cemetery*

can explore the few early Anglo-Saxon graves in which complete swords accompanied individuals identified as biological females.⁶⁵ All exhibit unconventional features when compared with ‘male’ sword burials.

Sword burials 33 and 93 at Buckland, Dover (Kent) contained individuals with both male and female characteristics: a consequence of poor bone preservation at the site, but it is possible that one or both were biological

⁶⁵ As opposed to parts used as keepsakes, jewellery or fashioned into weaving beaters (for the latter, see Sue Harrington, *Aspects of Gender Identity and Craft Production in the European Migration Period: Iron Weaving Beaters and Associated Textile Making Tools from England, Norway and Alamannia*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1797 (Oxford, 2008). The strange artefact thought to be an Iron Age sword buried with a probable woman at Castledyke-on-Humber is excluded on the basis of its uncertain identification: Gail Drinkall and Martin Foreman, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Castledyke South, Barton-on-Humber*, Sheffield Excavation Reports 6 (Sheffield, 1998), p. 248.

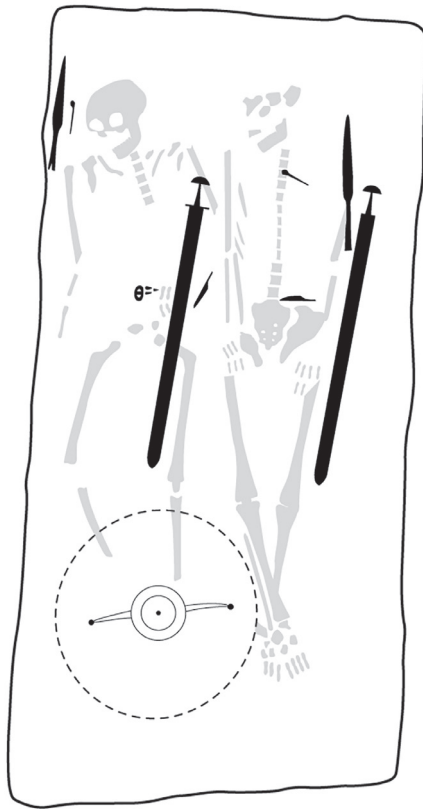


Fig. 39: Double sword burial, male on left and female on right (as pictured). Grave 96, Buckland, Dover (Kent) (No. 121). By Craig Williams, after Evison, *Dover*

women.⁶⁶ While there is nothing unusual about the sword's location in grave 33 (along the dead's left side; No. 129), grave 93 is a rare example of a sword being divided from the dead by another weapon (a seax). Grave 96 at Buckland contained two individuals each buried with a sword: a male on the left of the grave (96a) and a female on the right (96b) (Fig. 39). Evison viewed the pair as homosexual males despite the skeletal report,⁶⁷ but there is no reason to doubt that the second individual was female nor that the weapons surrounding her belonged to her male companion rather

⁶⁶ Evison, *Dover*, pp. 125–6.

⁶⁷ Evison, *Dover*, pp. 126 and 129; challenged by Sam Lucy, 'Housewives, Warriors and Slaves? Sex and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Burials', *Invisible People and Processes: Writing Gender and Childhood into European Archaeology*, ed. Jenny Moore and Eleanor Scott (London and New York, 1997), pp. 150–68 at pp. 154–6 and 161.

than herself.⁶⁸ There are, however, curiosities in her tableau. Her grave appears to be the only sword burial in the cemetery in which the body was not laid out straight. Also unusual are her crossed feet.⁶⁹ Moreover, her body is divided from the sword by another weapon (a spear) while her male companion's sword is placed immediately on his left side in the conventional manner. The difference between male and female sword tableaux is especially stark here, as the two appear side-by-side in the same grave, offering a direct visual comparison.

Overall, none of the studied graves revealed a certain biological female buried with a sword in a conventional burial tableau: variances in the positioning of both body and weapon hint that the relationship between the two differed somehow from that experienced by men (correlating with trends in other sources: see Chapter 4). Nonetheless, these graves are significant commentators about perceptions of swords. They show that these weapons were appropriate as grave goods for women, but their presence may have carried different meanings, evoked by the tweaked tableau. It would be tempting to infer that the closest relationship between sword and wielder was reserved for those who typically used (or were perceived as using) swords as weapons. While we cannot exclude the possibility that Anglo-Saxon women wore or wielded swords in combat, proof is yet to be found. It remains likely that most fighters were men, and this alone may have been enough to dictate that women buried with swords received a different grave tableau. Nonetheless, the burial of women with swords may add new dimensions of understanding for early medieval warrior identities and the role of swords therein. The debate will evolve as osteological analysis becomes increasingly standard in post-excavation research, and the discovery of a certain biological female buried with a sword in a conventional tableau is by no means out of the question; in fact, it is to be predicted.

Perceptions of Swords in Time

So far, this chapter has focused on swords from early graves. Pursuing the same lines of enquiry into the later period is complicated by a seismic change in the treatment of material culture in England: the decline of furnished burial in the late seventh century. With graves no longer an option, rivers became the place of choice for sword deposition. Furnished burials made a fleeting cameo during the ninth to tenth centuries in Scandinavian-settled northern England, but their identity and the views they evoke

⁶⁸ Stoodley, *The Spindle*, p. 30.

⁶⁹ Evison, *Dover*, p. 129; interpreted at p. 18 as making 'room for the shield placed over the feet of 96a'. This would seem to be unnecessary as shields routinely covered body parts in Anglo-Saxon graves.

– Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, or a blend of the two – are debated.⁷⁰ Later burials thus offer a limited view of how Anglo-Saxon perceptions of swords developed over time. Comparison with Scandinavia assists here, via inhumations drawn primarily from cemeteries at Kaupang in Norway, Haithabu (Hedeby) in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, and Birka in Sweden. All three were trading sites home to communities blending local, regional and international elements,⁷¹ meaning that their funerary rites may not always reflect broad ‘Scandinavian’ trends; but consistencies in the treatment of swords across the sites hint at a wider sharing of attitudes towards these weapons, forming a sturdy basis for analysis.

Finding wear on sword fittings grows more challenging from around the eighth century when hilts are increasingly made from iron. Iron corrodes more dramatically than non-ferrous metals used on earlier swords, obliterating more subtle clues about a weapon’s condition. However, many iron fittings were embellished with copper, copper alloy, silver and – rarely – gold, which do preserve signs of wear. Thus, silver mounts trimming a sword from Wensley Churchyard, North Yorkshire (No. 130) bear incised motifs that have eroded through wear, especially on the central pommel lobe and lower edge of the upper grip mount (Fig. 40),⁷² while a sword from Reading, Berkshire (No. 131) has very worn guards, attested by the flattened relief ornament adorning them.⁷³ Wear and tear is also

⁷⁰ Caroline Paterson, ‘A Tale of Two Cemeteries: Viking Burials at Cumwhitton and Carlisle, Cumbria’, *Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Art, Material Culture, Language and Literature of the Early Medieval World*, ed. Eric Cambridge and Jane Hawkes (Oxford, 2017), pp. 149–59; Caroline Paterson, Adam J. Parsons, Rachel M. Newman, Nick Johnson and Christine Howard-Davis, *Shadows in the Sand: Excavation of a Viking-Age Cemetery at Cumwhitton* (Oxford, 2014); Redmond, *Viking Burial*; Hadley, ‘Negotiating Gender’; B. J. N. Edwards, ‘The Vikings in North West England’, *Viking Treasure from the North West: The Cuerdale Hoard in Its Context*, ed. James Graham-Campbell (Liverpool, 1992), pp. 43–62. A Scandinavian link is likely in one case at least, where strontium and oxygen isotope analysis suggested that the two individuals buried with a sword in grave 511 at Repton (Derbyshire) probably grew up in southern Scandinavia (Paul Budd, Andrew Millard, Carolyn Chenery and Sam Lucy, ‘Investigating Population Movement by Stable Isotope Analysis: A Report from Britain’, *Antiquity* 78 (2004), pp. 127–41).

⁷¹ Birka’s chamber graves, for instance, are unusual in the context of the hinterland where cremation beneath a mound was the more typical rite (Björn Ambrosiani, ‘Birka’, *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London, 2008), pp. 94–100 at p. 97).

⁷² Wilson, ‘Some Neglected’, p. 41.

⁷³ East dated the sword to the eighth century based on its form and decoration; but this disagreed with her ninth-century date for the grave, which in her view contained a Scandinavian warrior. Either the sword was half a century old when buried, or Scandinavians had travelled further into England’s hinterland earlier than previously thought. Uncomfortable with the former, East chose the latter (Katherine East, ‘A Lead Model and a Rediscovered Sword, Both with Gripping Beast Decoration’, *Medieval Archaeology* 30 (1986), pp. 1–7 at p. 6; cf. David A. Hinton, *Archaeology, Economy and Society: England from the Fifth*



Fig. 40: Hilt with worn areas marked. Wensley Churchyard (North Yorkshire) (No. 130). © Trustees of the British Museum

found on later Scandinavian swords. One decorative technique provides a particularly rich hunting ground. In the eighth and ninth centuries, hilts were often inlaid with coloured wires arranged to form geometric patterns or the illusion of metal plating. This was achieved by cutting a channel into the iron and hammering in a wire of slightly thicker width, the edges of which spread out on either side of the channel, merging with adjacent wires to cover the iron's surface. Polishing, touching and rubbing from clothing eventually caused the wire 'spreads' to wear away, leaving only the wires sunken into the channel and exposing the iron between them. The effect resembles a patch of unworn 'plating' with a stripy 'fringe'.⁷⁴ This wear signature is almost ubiquitous on weapons decorated using this technique, exemplified by swords from grave K/XX at Kaupang (No. 132), grave 561a at Birka (Uppland) (Fig. 41; No. 133), and all three swords



Fig. 41: Hilt with worn areas marked. Grave 561a, Birka, Uppland, Sweden (No. 133). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

to the Fifteenth Century (London, 1990), pp. 69–70). The evidence for old swords presented in this book shows that there is little reason to doubt the antiquity of the Reading weapon.

⁷⁴ I am grateful to Vegard Vike, Conservator at Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, for discussion of this process.

from the boat grave at Haithabu, Schleswig-Holstein (Nos. 134–6).⁷⁵ In the latter grave, the guards of sword 'Ab1' were inlaid with silver and copper stripes, each two wires thick; but the original effect survives only in places, the rest taking on the 'fringed' appearance where the wires have worn down to the channels beneath. This is matched on the pommel of sword 'Ab', where the 'plating' gives way to fringe-like wires towards the top (Figs 42–3). The familiar wear hallmark of flattened filigree appears on sword 'Bb' from the Haithabu boat grave⁷⁶ and, most vividly, on another from grave 942 at Birka (No. 137). The thick silver beading flanking the pommel's central field has worn completely smooth in places, on the top resembling a flat band with scalloped edges hinting at the original beads (Fig. 44). The beaded band dividing pommel from lower guard is also badly affected at each end.⁷⁷

Clearly, similar types of wear appear on both early and later swords in England and Scandinavia. It also occurs in similar places, clustering on parts of the hilt that were most susceptible to touching and rubbing against clothing: a grip mount on the Wensley Churchyard sword; the guards on the Reading sword and sword 'Ab1' from Haithabu; and the tops of pommels from grave 561a at Birka and sword 'Ab' from Haithabu. One or two better preserved sword hilts also bear asymmetrical wear patterns analogous to their earlier counterparts. The incised motifs on the Wensley sword are fainter on one face (Fig. 40), a pattern also noted by East on the Reading sword, hinting that these swords were sheathed regularly with the same side facing inwards against the body.⁷⁸ Grave 62 at Haithabu (No. 138) offers a Scandinavian case, with one pommel face seeming 'fringier' than the other where more of its inlaid wires have worn away.

⁷⁵ Ute Arents and Silke Eisenschmidt, *Die Gräber von Haithabu, Band 2: Katalog, Listen, Tafeln, Beilagen* (Neumünster, 2010), pp. 111–25; Michael Mülle-Wille, *Das Bootkammergrab von Haithabu* (Neumünster, 1976), pp. 35–42 and pp. 66–78.

⁷⁶ Mülle-Wille, *Das Bootkammergrab*, Abb. 30.

⁷⁷ Like the Reading sword, this weapon has been identified as a chronological mismatch with its grave. While Birka's graves have been dated broadly to the ninth to tenth centuries, the sword has been categorised as a late eighth- to early ninth-century type (Petersen's *Særtyp* 1 or Mannheim type), with filigree spirals on its hilt echoing sixth- or seventh-century styles (Władysław Duczko, *The Filigree and Granulation Work of the Viking Period: An Analysis of the Material from Björkö, Birka* (Stockholm, 1985), pp. 104–5). More recently, Lena Thålin-Bergman ('Übersicht über die Schwerter von Birka', *Birka II:2 Systematische Analysen der Gräberfunde*, ed. Greta Arwidsson (Stockholm, 1986), pp. 11–14) categorised the sword as Petersen's Type D (c. 800–50) and Historiska Museet in Stockholm (where the sword is held) as Type V (c. 900–50), both of which are closer to the grave's proposed date. Again, chronological mathematics are perhaps a less important marker of the sword's antiquity than its obviously degraded condition.

⁷⁸ East, 'Lead Model', p. 2.

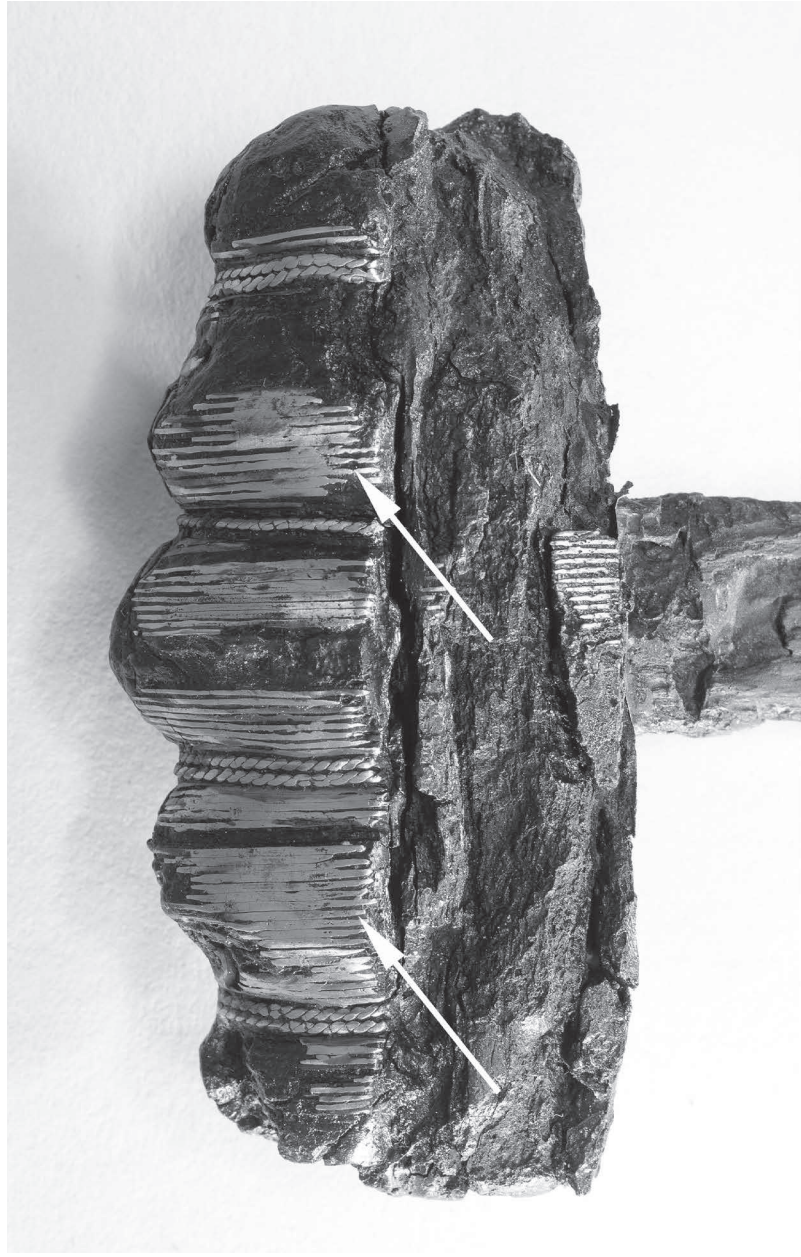


Fig. 42: Hilt with worn areas marked. Sword 'Ab', boat grave, Haithabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany (No. 134).
© Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig. Photo: Claudia Janke

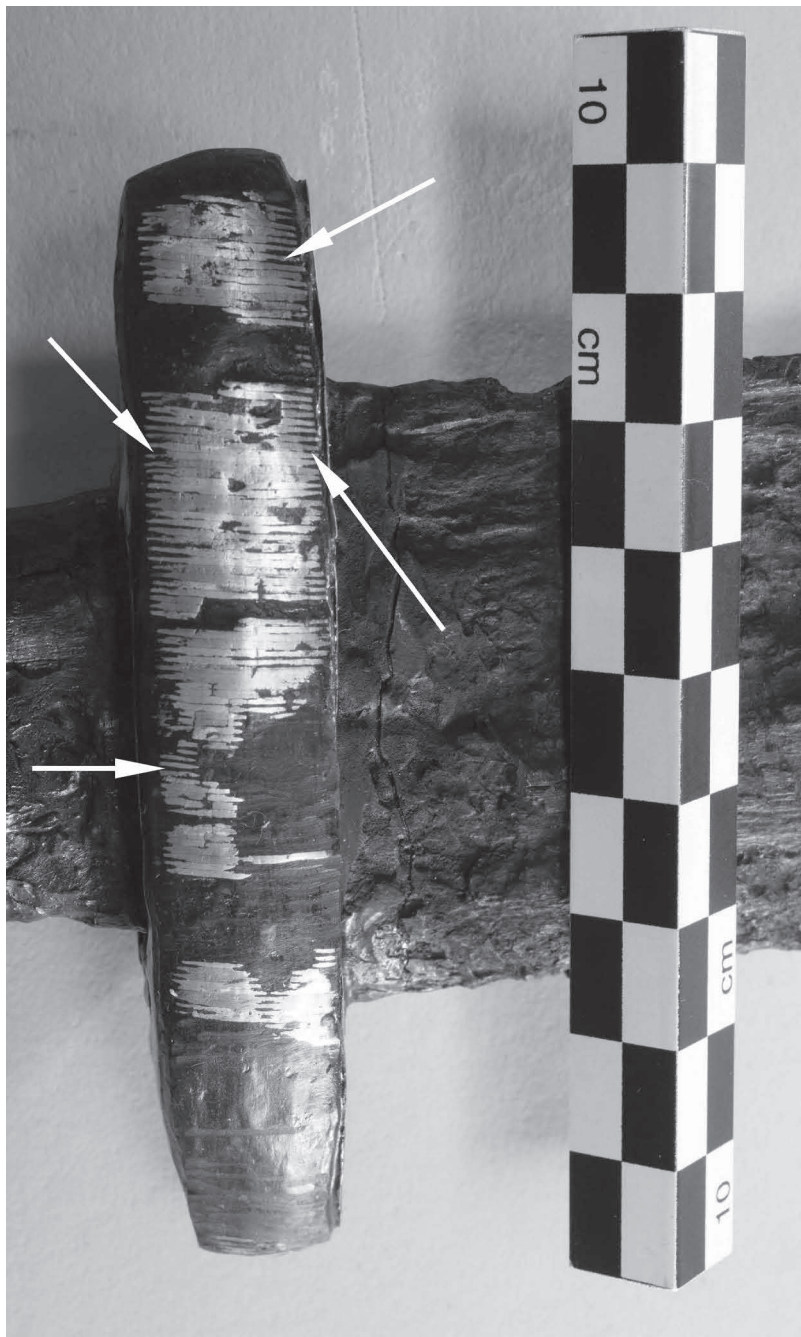


Fig. 43: Hilt with worn areas marked. Sword 'Ab1', boat grave, Haithabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany (No. 135).
© Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig. Photo: Claudia Janke

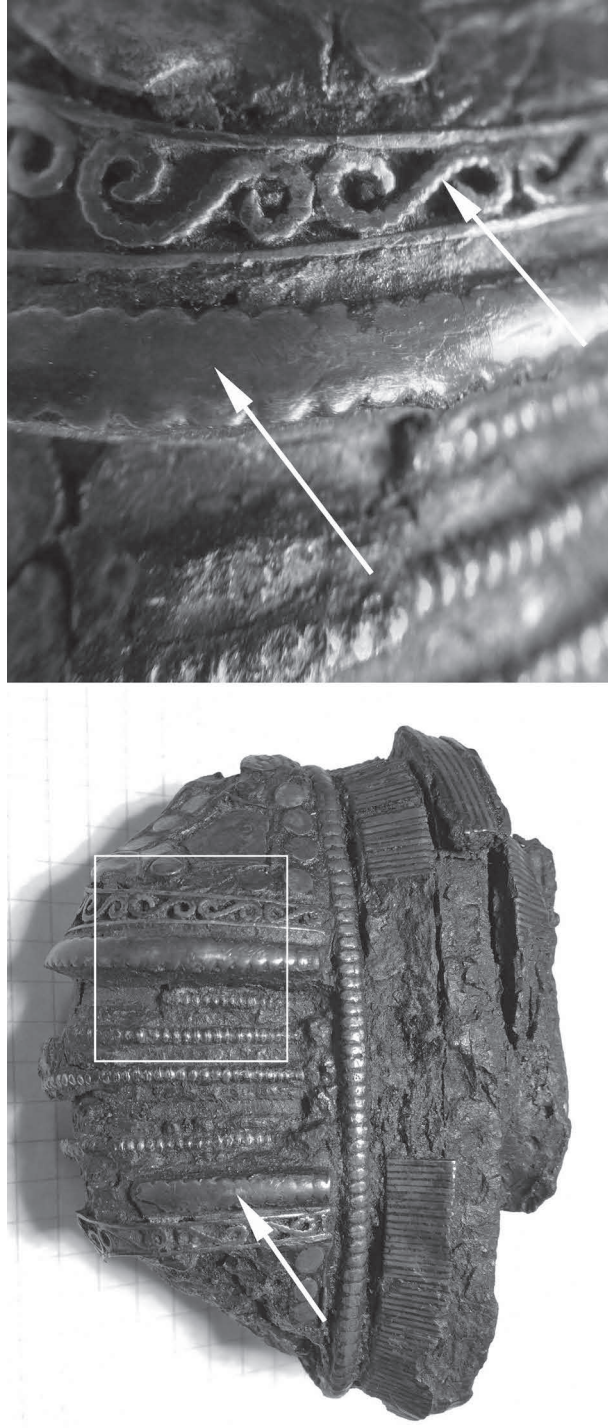


Fig. 44: Pommel with worn areas marked (detail area outlined). Grave 942, Birka, Uppland, Sweden (No. 137). © The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

Like earlier swords, a few later weapons were apparently refurbished. Several rivets piercing the appliques on the Wensley hilt may have been added to shore them up when their soldering weakened.⁷⁹ From Scandinavia, chamber grave II at Haithabu (No. 139) yielded a damaged sword that had been reshaped and fitted with a new scabbard, while the lower guard on a sword from Bikjholberget, Kaupang, grave K/XX (No. 132), may have been repaired or replaced.⁸⁰ A striking repair beyond the studied area is a blade from Österfärnebo (Gästrikland), Sweden, which was riveted back together after a breakage.⁸¹ Far fewer examples of modifications emerged among the later weapons. One from Långtora (Uppland), Sweden (No. 140), a probable import, carries a silver mount that Arbman believed was inscribed with runes after arriving in Sweden – although Wilson interpreted the ‘runes’ as damage.⁸² The lower number of repaired and modified swords in the later sample may be due, in part, to difficulties in identifying them; but it could reflect a genuine decline in this behaviour. Later hilts were made from fewer pieces, typically in iron rather than organic materials. Their simplicity and durability may have reduced the need for repairs but may also have made them harder to modify: for instance, iron pommels could not be pierced for a ring fitting in the same way silver pommel caps could (indeed the practice had disappeared by the eighth century). If so, one means by which a wielder related to a sword – by building its visual identity and linking it to one’s own life history – was no longer available.

The condition of later swords, being ‘similar but different’ to that of earlier swords, may thus reflect both continuity and change in attitudes towards these weapons. Comparable wear patterns imply a measure of continuity in how wielders interacted with swords, wearing them frequently on the body, touching them often and sheathing them the same way every time. This suggests that swords remained relevant to their wielders’ identities off the battlefield and conveyed broader messages than simply ‘martial power’. It also shows that later swords were curated and passed on just as their earlier counterparts had been; indeed, in England swords may have circulated even longer than before when the decline of furnished burials removed this option for disposal. Clearly, swords continued to play a role in social networks and transactions, linking individuals and groups over considerable periods of time. Waning modificatory practices may have fuelled changes in how swords

⁷⁹ Wilson, ‘Some Neglected’, p. 41.

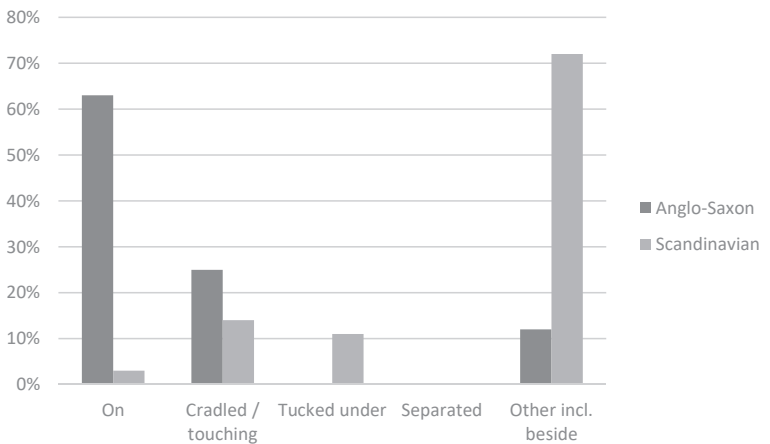
⁸⁰ Arents and Eisenschmidt, *Die Gräber*, pp. 96–7; Charlotte Blindheim and Birgit Heyerdahl-Larsen, *Kaupang-Funnene, Bind II: Gravplassene I – Bikjholbergene/Lamøya Undersøkelsene 1950–1957 Del A: Gravskikk* (Oslo, 1995), p. 48.

⁸¹ Stockholm, Historiska Museet 5237; Androschuck, *Viking Swords*, cat. no. Gå 79–80, p. 349.

⁸² Holger Arbman, ‘En Kammargrav från Vikingatiden vid Långtora’, *Fornvännen* 31 (1936), pp. 89–98 at pp. 90–2; Wilson, ‘Some Neglected’, p. 38.

were perceived. They may no longer have been customised in step with a wielder's career, which in turn may have weakened the notion that the identities of sword and owner were intertwined. Fewer options to make one's sword visually idiosyncratic creates a sense of decreasing personality and greater genericity in their appearance: for instance, the mismatched pommel faces of earlier swords give way to more symmetrical designs, so that later weapons look the same from any angle. Changes in hilt design, which reduced an owner's customisation options, were part of wider developments in sword manufacture that also involved the decline of pattern-welding;⁸³ thus blades too lost an outlet for visual eccentricity and gained a plainer, more standardised look. Even scabbards became less decorative and more 'utilitarian' in aspect.⁸⁴ One must surely wonder whether these developments made swords seem less characterful, and less personal, to their wielders (see Chapter 4).

The few furnished burials known from later Anglo-Saxon England reveal a similar trend of continuity and change in how swords were positioned in burial tableaux. Later mourners seem to have shared earlier concerns to place swords close by the deceased. While the burials are few, none for which records survive contain a sword that was separated from the body in some way. This is mirrored in Scandinavia, where most swords were beside the body and nearly a fifth were touching, being touched by or lying on the deceased (Graph 11). The mourners' active choice in this is demonstrated by boat grave 1 at Valsgärde (No. 141):

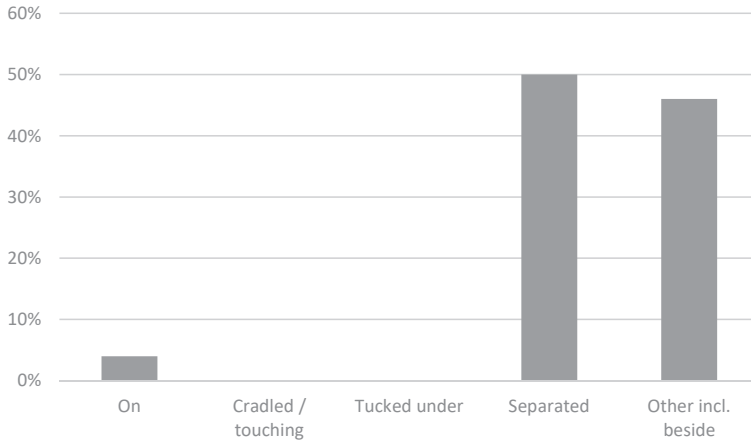


Graph 11: Proximity of swords in later burials, relative to the deceased

⁸³ Gilmour, 'Swords, Seaxes and Saxons', pp. 102–3.

⁸⁴ Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*, p. 58.

The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe



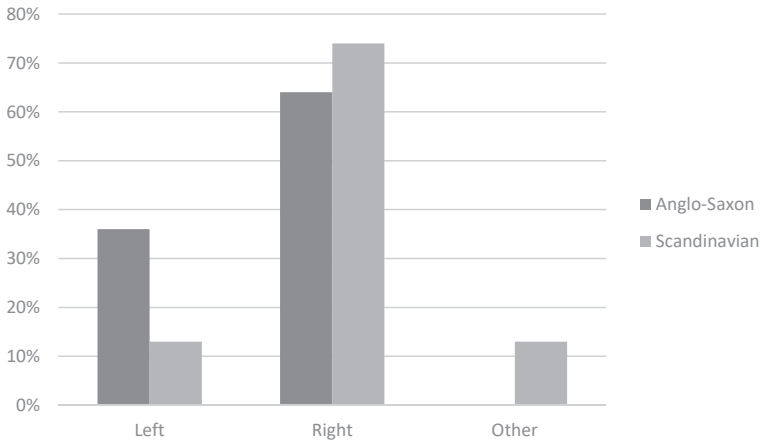
Graph 12: Proximity of spears in later Scandinavian burials, relative to the deceased

while most grave goods were arranged on the base of the boat, the dead person and his sword were set apart on raised planking.⁸⁵ Swords still seem to have ‘outranked’ spears in the grave, maintaining their privileged position relative to the dead. Too little information survives about the Anglo-Saxon burials, but in the better-recorded Scandinavian graves half of spears with a recorded position were divided from the dead by a grave feature or another weapon, the latter being a sword in most cases (Graph 12).

A change, however, may have occurred in the side of the body upon which swords were placed. The dominant left-hand positioning, so typical of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian graves before the eighth century, appears to switch to the right (Graph 13). In England, just eleven swords have a recorded grave position but well over half were found on the deceased’s right side. In the larger Scandinavian sample, the number reaches three-quarters; even where skeletal remains were sparse, the sword was often so near to one edge of the grave that it could only have lain on the body’s right side. The situation in England could, therefore, reflect Scandinavian influence rather than a conscious break with earlier Anglo-Saxon traditions; but an explanation is required for the switch in Scandinavia. Swords were still worn on the left, so it was not motivated by a change in this convention. Nor can it be explained as a preponderance of left-handers, or local customs, as examples are too numerous and widespread. A change in attitudes may have been a factor. Perhaps a notion that swords should be laid on the side of wearing was superseded

⁸⁵ Allan Fridell, ‘The First Boat Grave at Valsgärde’, *Valsgärde 1, 2 and 4*, Museum Gustavianum Research Group, Valsgärde Studies (Uppsala, 2013), pp. 44–5.

Archaeology



Graph 13: Placement of swords in later burials, relative to the deceased's body side

by one that laid them on the side of wielding. Visually, and perhaps psychologically for the mourners, swords placed in this way were more accessible to the deceased – easier to grasp or snatch up. This shift may reflect a concern for a 'ready' sword at a time marred by violence and major social, political and spiritual change. Indeed, in at least two graves at Søndre Bikjholberget, Kaupang (Norway), swords may even have been arranged upright beside the dead, contravening the ubiquitous pattern of reversed swords in graves (Nos. 142–3).⁸⁶ Another reading is that the shift from the sword's traditional sheathed position (on the left) to the wielding side (on the right) mirrored a shift in how swords functioned as attributes: from elite identity markers to lethal warrior weapons. This correlates with ideas in other sources (see Chapter 4).

A small group of later burials show a continued link between women and swords – but still with unconventional features. A grave at Santon Downham, Norfolk (No. 144) contained a skeleton accompanied by a sword and a pair of oval brooches typical of female Scandinavian dress. This unusual combination of typically male and female accoutrements fuelled various explanations: a second male skeleton must have been overlooked; or the sword was a weaving beater and thus a feminine object.⁸⁷ The mystery is hard to solve since the grave, excavated in the nineteenth century, was poorly recorded. In Scandinavia, however, several sword

⁸⁶ I am grateful to Marianne Hem Eriksen (Universitetet i Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum) for checking my translation of the relevant passages in Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen, *Kaupang-Funnene Bind II*; it should be noted, however, that in both graves the human remains are only partially preserved.

⁸⁷ Vera I. Evison, 'A Viking Age Burial at Sonning, Berks', *Antiquaries Journal* 49 (1969), pp. 330–45; Jesch, *Women*, p. 21.

burials containing individuals identified as women have been excavated at Birka – including one that was recently the subject of intense academic and public debate. Most of these graves are double burials with the other occupant assumed to be male (graves 644, 731, 735, 750, 823a and 834: Nos. 145–50). Grave 823a was disturbed by a second burial and conveys little helpful information. In graves 644, 735 and 750 the sword was placed on the male's side of the grave, strengthening its link to him while weakening that with his female companion.⁸⁸ The occupants of graves 644 and 834 seem to have been buried sitting up with the female on the male's lap, meaning that the sword beside them cannot be attributed to one over the other (particularly given the tangled condition of their remains).⁸⁹ The significance of the sword's placement is also unclear in grave 731, apparently laid horizontally above both occupants although their remains do not survive. In at least half of these burials, then, the sword is in direct association with an assumed male, and in the other half, in partial association: none of the swords were associated primarily with the female. From this it seems that the principal partnership between humans and swords was, in some ways, restricted to men: while women had limited access to swords, the archaeological record hints that their relationship with this weapon was not quite the same as that of men.

However, grave 581 (No. 151) furnished a possible (though controversial) instance of a woman buried not only with a sword, but with other martial accoutrements. Genomic analysis identified the occupant as female and presented the grave as proof that female warriors existed in the Viking period.⁹⁰ There followed an intense reaction, played out in the news and social media. The authors' analyses, methods and interpretation were all questioned; they were accused particularly of reaching too boldly for a 'warrior' interpretation, a critique that invoked cries of sexism by those who felt aggrieved at what they saw as an out-of-hand dismissal that women could have been fighters in the past. A more germane charge was that the researchers seemed to play down uncertainties surrounding the grave's contents and whether the skeleton and sword were even from the same grave.⁹¹ However, if we give the case the benefit of the doubt, accept that the skeleton and sword were correctly matched, and see the grave plan as a largely accurate record of the burial tableau, grave 581 actually fits the pattern of exceptionality in the archaeological relation-

⁸⁸ This is determined from the burial tableau for grave 750 since no human remains survived.

⁸⁹ Holger Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 1 [Text]* (Stockholm, 1943), p. 221; Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 133–7 and figs 3.8a–b.

⁹⁰ Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 'A Female Viking Warrior'.

⁹¹ Neatly summarised by Howard M. Williams, 'Viking Warrior Women: An Archaeodeath Response – Part 1', *Archaeodeath* blog post, <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2017/09/14/viking-warrior-women-an-archaeodeath-response-part-1/> (accessed 21 March 2018).

ship between swords and women. Again, the tableau is different in some way: the individual is not, as was conventional, laid out flat alongside the sword but rather crouched with the weapon behind. Furthermore, the grave's prominent location in the cemetery and its elaborate contents enhance its unusual aura. As such, the presence of a sword in this grave may support the view that the occupant was female, irrespective of how well the case was made in the original article – suggesting that the burial of a female with a sword – be she a warrior or otherwise – was unusual, but not impossible.

Perceptions of Swords in Space

The preceding discussion has shown that Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian communities treated their swords in similar ways throughout the period. They curated these weapons over considerable lengths of time, wearing them on their bodies regularly enough for their fittings to deteriorate; and they sometimes modified their original form, in the first half of the period at least. Early on, mourners from both regions buried their dead with their swords along their left-hand side, touching or even cradled by their body; but later, swords migrated to the right-hand side while still remaining literally and figuratively close at hand for the dead. These behavioural analogies may evoke a sharing of perceptions between these two regions that lasted the test of time.

The most significant chronological departure in the treatment of swords concerns furnished burial, which faded from use in eighth-century England but lingered into the eleventh century in Scandinavia. Those wishing to dispose of a sword now had to find an alternative to the grave. The swell in sword finds from English rivers⁹² hints that some simply ended their 'lives' in water rather than the ground; but others probably passed to new owners, perhaps for far longer than they had during the furnished burial period. Documentary proof of the practice survives in late Anglo-Saxon wills, some of which describe swords of impressive antiquity.⁹³ It is hard to know how far these changes influenced attitudes towards swords in England. In one sense, the end of furnished burial created

⁹² Summarised above, p. 10. As a balance, it should be noted that weapons had been deposited in English rivers since the Neolithic period, and in Anglo-Saxon times large numbers of spearheads appear to have been placed in watercourses, most notably the River Thames, even during the period of furnished burials – the ratio between grave and river deposits being estimated as 1:1 in one study (John Hines, 'Religion: The Limits of Knowledge', *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 375–401 at pp. 380–1).

⁹³ Henry Royston Loyn and John Percival, trans., *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration* (London, 1975), no. 28;

a permanent rupture in the eternal bond between sword and wielder that the grave provided. This in turn may have influenced a gradual distancing of the two in Anglo-Saxon minds, their identities becoming progressively unmeshed until swords seemed less an extension of self and more a simple tool or status attribute. In another sense, swords that circulated for longer periods would have forged bonds with a greater number of wielders while building richer, more diverse biographies in the minds of those who encountered them. This may have worked in another way, however. Swords perhaps grew more attainable, since family members, friends and acquaintances who may not have been able to acquire one in earlier centuries might now receive one as a bequest. Instead of enriching a sword's character, longer lives, longer chains of ownership and more diffuse social networks may have diluted it. Perhaps it became more challenging, and less meaningful, to track a sword's history; and as such, earlier notions of distinctive personalities and 'living' swords may have declined accordingly. This intersects well with the increased genericity in the physical form of swords, discussed above. But while this model may work for England, it may not have materialised in Scandinavia, where furnished burial rites preserved the perpetual bond between sword and wielder for several more centuries. Evidence from art and literature helps to disentangle these complicated ideas further (see Chapter 4).

* * *

The archaeology of swords provides a window on attitudes towards them, albeit with the occasional smudge obscuring the view. The condition of surviving swords is redolent of curation and circulation, articulating the deep significance they held both for their wielders personally, and within society more generally. This resonates in the grave, where the propinquity between sword and deceased conveys a real concern to ally the two in perpetuity, forcing other weapons to make way. This partnership appears to have been delimited to men: while women were buried with swords, exceptional features in their contexts hint that their relationship with the weapon was not quite the same. Such behaviour towards swords had some degree of continuity across time and space, suggesting that perceptions were stable in part; but changes in manufacture and deposition may have realigned certain thoughts regarding the sword's primary symbolic meaning, from an elite attribute towards a warrior weapon – perhaps finding an outlet, in Scandinavia at least, in the way swords were laid out in the burial tableau.

Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 95; see pp. 136–7.

3

Text

A diverse array of texts survive from Anglo-Saxon England, encompassing histories, chronicles, poetry, inscriptions, letters, religious texts, laws, charters and wills, composed in Latin and vernacular languages and written in the runic and Roman alphabets. Surprisingly few contain detailed references to swords. The great exception is vernacular poetry. Old English verse bristles with swords, narrating not only their use in battle but also who made and owned them, how they circulated and even their names and temperaments. It is matched in this by Scandinavian vernacular poetry, composed in Old Norse. Accordingly, these sources form the natural focus for this chapter.

Old English poems are preserved in a group of mid-tenth- to eleventh-century manuscripts but contain elements of older tales and ideas transmitted orally over generations: part of *Genesis* has been attributed to the early eighth century while some experts place *Beowulf's* roots in the seventh century, predating the manuscript in which it survives by more than three hundred years. Poems recounting traditional tales could contain even older material, albeit subject to a degree of corruption, adaptation and reconstruction.¹ Old Norse 'skaldic' poetry, named after the 'skalds' (poets) who composed it, is preserved in medieval Icelandic sagas² but is widely attributed to the late tenth to eleventh centuries, with

¹ S. A. J. Bradley, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1982), pp. xiii–iv; for *Beowulf*, see Leonard Neidorf, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment* (Cambridge, 2014).

² The Icelandic sagas form a distinct area of literary specialism and are not treated in detail here. Written down from the twelfth century onwards, they are often set in early medieval Scandinavia and swords are conspicuous in their subject matter. However, their late date and Icelandic origin, together with queries about the extent of their oral or literary beginnings, problematise their use as sources for earlier Scandinavia. Some have rejected them completely while others still welcome their (cautious) use. A pragmatic view is that sagas are probably unreliable for historical facts, but *may* be helpful for attitudes, ideologies and customs. See Jesch, *Women*, p. 4; Lars Lönnroth, 'The Icelandic Sagas', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London, 2008), pp. 304–10; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Historical Reality and Literary Form', *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium, 14–15 May 1992*, ed. Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London, 1993), pp. 172–81; Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 305 and 309.

some poems thought to be older still.³ Skaldic poems are so intricate in form and metre that experts believe they were transmitted uncorrupted from the Viking period – it was too difficult to modify them. Their veracity is supported further by the fact that many can be linked to named, dated skalds and were composed and recited publicly to honour a named individual's deeds on a specific, dated occasion.⁴ This, together with its dense martial imagery, makes skaldic poetry an invaluable source for Scandinavian views about swords, and one rarely exploited beyond specialist studies due to its complexity.⁵ This chapter is based on analysis of all relevant Old English poems, and Old Norse poems by skalds dated to the ninth to eleventh centuries who are named in *Konungasögur* ('Kings' Sagas'), the type of sagas that experts believe are likeliest to be genuine early medieval compositions.⁶ It explores the portrayal of swords in verse as well as their appearance in 'kennings', linguistic constructions that replace simple nouns to vivid effect: hence, a skaldic kenning for 'fire' is *ból markar* ('harm of the forest'),⁷ alluding to trees' vulnerability to

³ Some experts date Bragi inn gamli Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa* to the mid-ninth century: Judith Jesch, 'Poetry in the Viking Age', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London, 2008), pp. 291–8 at p. 296; cf. Judith Jesch, 'Eagles, Ravens and Wolves: Beasts of Battle, Symbols of Victory and Death', *The Scandinavians from the Vendel Period to the Tenth Century*, ed. Judith Jesch (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 251–71 at p. 273; Russell G. Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative* (Toronto, 1991), pp. 18–19.

⁴ Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London, 2011), pp. 11–13; Hall, *Exploring the World*, p. 21; Jesch, 'Eagles, Ravens and Wolves', p. 251; Jesch, 'Poetry', pp. 295–6. Old Norse 'Eddic' poetry, preserved in the thirteenth-century *Codex Regius* (or *Konungsbók*), is generally viewed as less trustworthy for earlier periods. Its subject matter is heroic and mythological rather than historical, its poets are anonymous and the metre less complex, making it harder to date and more susceptible to corruption over time. While certain experts argue that Eddic poems pre-date the *Codex Regius*, its early medieval origin is less accepted than that of skaldic poetry, hence this study's focus on the latter. See Jesch, 'Poetry', p. 295; Jesch, 'Eagles, Ravens and Wolves', pp. 251, 261 and 263–4; Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 18; Christiansen, *The Norsemen*, p. 309. The division between skaldic and Eddic verse is, however, increasingly challenged (Abram, *Myths*, p. 11; Jesch, 'Poetry', p. 293).

⁵ Jesch, 'Eagles, Ravens and Wolves', p. 261; Judith Jesch, 'Constructing the Warrior Ideal in the Late Viking Age', *The Martial Society: Aspects of Warriors, Fortifications and Social Change in Scandinavia*, ed. Lena Holmquist Olausson and Michael Olausson (Stockholm, 2009), pp. 71–7 at pp. 72 and 77; Abram, *Myths*, p. 13.

⁶ Jesch, *Ships and Men*, pp. 16ff. Dates are drawn from the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages Project's online database and publications: see Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2, Part 1* (Turnhout, 2009). Undated and anonymous poems were excluded, except where an early medieval date is widely accepted, e.g. for *Liðsmannaflokkur* and *Darraðarljóð*: Poole, *Viking Poems*.

⁷ Björn krepphendí, *Magnússdrápa* 3.

flames.⁸ Kennings are more characteristic of skaldic verse and can be fiendishly intricate in their references, demanding ample mythological knowledge on the part of their audience.⁹ Old English kennings are fewer and simpler, often little more than compound nouns like *billhete* ('sword-hate'), meaning 'battle'.¹⁰ Combined, this material offers some of the richest, most intriguing insights into early medieval thinking on swords.¹¹

Perceptions of Swords in Early Medieval Poetry

Early medieval poets, like the artists explored in Chapter 1, characterised swords by referring to their components, materials, manufacture, appearance and function. The choices they made convey much about how they, and their audience, perceived these weapons.

Conceptualising Swords

Echoing a pattern visible in art, the sword's different parts – blade, hilt, scabbard and sword-belt – receive unequal attention in poetry, hinting

⁸ Abram, *Myths*, pp. 13–15. For lists of kennings, see Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden: Ein beitrag zur skaldischen poetik* (Bonn, 1921); Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde*; Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages Project online; Hertha Marquardt, *Die altenglischen Kenningar: Ein Beitrag zur Stilkunde altgermanischer Dichtung*, Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft, Geisteswissenschaftliche Klasse, 14 Jahr, Heft 3 (Halle-Salle, 1938).

⁹ Abram, *Myths*, p. 15; Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 107–9.

¹⁰ Andreas, line 78. Thomas Gardner, 'The Old English Kenning: A Characteristic Feature of Germanic Poetical Diction', *Modern Philology* 67 (1969), pp. 109–17 at pp. 109–10; Ann Harleman Stewart, 'Kenning and Riddle in Old English', *Papers on Language and Literature* 15 (1979), pp. 115–36 at pp. 117–18. Kenning definitions differ among experts, with some stricter than others: see Gardner, 'Old English Kenning'; Harleman Stewart, 'Kenning and Riddle'; Loredana Teresi, 'The Old English Term *heoru* Reconsidered', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 86 (2004), pp. 127–78 at p. 164, n. 67. To aid comparison between Old Norse and Old English poetry, an inclusive approach is taken here: any compound or linguistic construction which substitutes the noun 'sword' (e.g. Old English *beadoleoma* ('battle light'): *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (London, 2000), line 1523; Old Norse *róggeisli* ('battle beam'): Björkr. *Mag.7*) or something *other* than a sword but containing a reference to a sword (e.g. Old English *sweordgripe* ('seizing of swords') for 'battle': *Juliana*, line 488; Old Norse *Ullr branda* ('Ullr of swords') for 'warrior': Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla* 21) was considered.

¹¹ The studied corpus numbers 25 Old English and 79 Old Norse poems or individual verses (*lausavísur*, 'loose verses') and 57 Old English and 240 Old Norse kennings referring to swords or spears, the latter collected for comparative purposes. The database is available on the Archaeology Data Service website at <https://doi.org/10.5284/1051621>, DOI 10.5284/1051621.

that certain parts were considered as more significant or interesting than others. This treatment shines further light upon how swords were defined conceptually in early medieval minds.

Scabbards and sword-belts are rarely mentioned. Usually, they appear only where blades are involved, such as when swords are drawn from their scabbards¹² or in blade kennings like *snarpur slíðrtungur* ('sharp scabbard-tongues'),¹³ *slíðrdúkaðar siglur samnagla* ('scabbard-covered masts [=blades] of rivet [=hilt]'),¹⁴ *íss sikulgjarðar* or *svell fetla* ('ice of sword-belt(s)')¹⁵ and *fetilstingr* ('sword-belt stabber').¹⁶ In the latter kennings, the Norse word *fetill* ('belt') also carries the general meaning 'strap',¹⁷ so a reference to a scabbard or sword-belt can only be inferred if the context suggests it. It seems that these sword parts neither inspired nor required a rich vocabulary, perhaps indicating that poets deemed them surplus to their portrayal of swords.

Blades, by contrast, are portrayed regularly and with remarkable detail and creativity. Poets created tangible portraits of how they looked. Their broad, long shape is conveyed by the Old English term *bradsword* ('broad sword') in *Judith*¹⁸ and by ubiquitous references to rods and wands in Old Norse sword kennings like *hjalmsprotar* ('helmet-rods'), *rá holbarkar* ('rod of mail-coat'), *benvöndr* ('wound wand'), *vöndr Gjallar* ('wand of Gjöll') and *vendir Viðris* ('wands of Viðrir').¹⁹ Different blade forms may be defined where poets substitute the generic terms *sweord* and *sverð* for more unusual nouns *bill* and *mece* in Old English, or *mækir* and *hjorr* in Old Norse, respectively.²⁰ In some cases metrical rules may have compelled poets to use an alternative term to fit the verse, but a skilled poet would have found a means to incorporate a favoured word: indeed, the consistent application of these nouns to certain weapons in certain poems hints that both poet and audience understood meaningful differences

¹² *Genesis*, line 1993; *Judith*, lines 77–81.

¹³ Glúmr Geirason, *Gráfeldardrápa* 3.

¹⁴ Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Frágment* 3.

¹⁵ Hallvarðr háreksblesi, *Knútsdrápa* 2; Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Lausavísa* 7.

¹⁶ Arn.Mag.6; Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Lausavísa* 3.

¹⁷ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1957), s.v. *fetill*.

¹⁸ Line 317.

¹⁹ Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson, *Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar* 5–6; Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Lausavísa* 5; Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Erfidrápa Óláfs Helga* 27; Vígfúss Víga-Glúmsson, *Lausavísa* 1. The sword kenning *folkskið* ('war-lath': *Eskál.Vell.*12) expresses a similar idea.

²⁰ Brady, "'Weapons' in *Beowulf*", pp. 79–82 and 91–3; Arthur Thomas Hatto, 'Snake-Swords and Boar-Helmets in *Beowulf*', *English Studies* 38 (1957), pp. 144–60 at p. 145; May Lansfield Keller, 'The Anglo-Saxon Weapon Names, Treated Archaeologically and Etymologically', *Anglistische Forschungen* 15 (1906), *passim* at pp. 157–8; Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde*, pp. 14–16; Gade, *Poetry*, p. 287, nn. 1–2.

between them.²¹ Poets capture even finer details of blades' characteristics. A skaldic verse credited to Norwegian king Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson (c. 1015–66) describes their colour as *blár* ('blue'),²² while curious phrases in *Beowulf* may allude to pattern-welded blades with designs echoing waves, coils, rings, twists and serpents.²³

Reference to the materiality of blades 'fleshes out' their portrait, literally and metaphorically. In *Beowulf* swords are denoted by the iron of their blades, an idea mirrored by the skaldic sword kenning *munnr malms* ('mouth of metal'),²⁴ numerous kennings pairing swords with light and ice may also allude to their bright, cold iron. Imagery of blade-smithing resounds in Old English sword kennings *lafa hamora* ('leavings of hammers') and *laf fela* ('leavings of files'),²⁵ offering a clue to a riddle in which an object – probably a sword – survives the cruelty of fire and file.²⁶ Sharpening tools become ciphers for swords in the Old English adjective *mylenscearp* ('mill-sharpened')²⁷ and skaldic kennings *heinland* ('whetstone land') and *laut heina* ('hollow of whetstones').²⁸ The sharpness of blades is an all-pervading image, characterised by recurring references to their edges.²⁹ The Anglo-Saxons claim victory *sweorda ecgum* ('by the edges of swords') in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, while in *Judith* and *Beowulf* swords have famous or proven edges; so much so, in fact, that *Beowulf* will not blame the sword Hrunting's edges when they fail to injure Grendel's mother.³⁰ In skaldic verse, warriors often redden their blades' edges with enemy blood.³¹ Indeed, warrior kennings include *heggr eggja tveggja mækis* ('tree of the sword's two edges') while a kenning for 'wound' is *spor eggja*

²¹ Brady, "'Weapons' in *Beowulf*", p. 93.

²² *Lausavísa* 13.

²³ *Wægsweord* ('wave-sword' or 'sword with a wavy pattern', line 1489); *hringmæl* ('coiling pattern' or 'with ring-like patterns', line 1521); *wundenmæl* ('twisted pattern', line 1531); *atertanum fah* ('gleaming with twigs of venom' or 'tiny serpents', line 1460). Brady, "'Weapons' in *Beowulf*", pp. 94, 96 and 101; John R. Clark-Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Toronto and London, 1960), s.v. these terms; Hatto, 'Snake-Swords', pp. 145ff. Alternatively, the terms may describe interlacing zoomorphic ornamentation on the sword hilt, but as most of these terms are unique to *Beowulf* it is difficult to surmise too much from them.

²⁴ Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Vikingavísur* 14.

²⁵ *The Battle of Brunanburh*, line 6; *Beowulf*, line 2829; *Riddle* 5, line 7; *Beowulf*, line 1032.

²⁶ *Riddle* 71, lines 3–4.

²⁷ *Brunanburh*, line 24; alluding to a rotary grindstone: Walton, 'Words', pp. 990–3.

²⁸ Hallv. *Knúts*.5; Glúmr. *Grá*.4.

²⁹ *Judith*, lines 87–91; *Riddle* 5, line 8; Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Poem about Haraldr hárfagri* 3.

³⁰ *Brunanburh*, line 4; *Riddle* 5, line 4; *Judith*, line 231; *Beowulf*, line 1145; *ibid.*, lines 1807–12.

³¹ Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Haraldsdrápa* 2; Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Magnússdrápa* 5; Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Magnússflokkur* 18.

sverðs ('trail of the edges of the sword').³² So prevalent are these references that modern translators sometimes render the general nouns *ecg* (Old English) and *egg* (Old Norse) as 'sword', treating it almost as a synonym.³³ It is not clear whether early medieval minds made the same leap; after all, swords were not the only edged weapon on their battlefields. However, the ready pairing of swords with edges in poetic imagery suggests that sometimes, at least, 'sword' was inferred from 'edge' where the type of weapon was unspecified.³⁴ This would offer compelling evidence that blades were central to the conceptualisation of swords in early medieval thinking.

Hilts are also well-defined in the poems. Poets describe their adornment with precious metals, occasionally silver but usually gold,³⁵ and in *Beowulf*, several very detailed hilt portraits hint that this component was the primary vehicle of a sword's visual identity, and the means by which people differentiated one sword from others. Most renowned is the lingering report of the sword from Grendel's mere, its golden *wreopenhilt* ('twisted hilt') festooned with images and inscribed with its commissioner's name in runes. The extra descriptor *wyrmfah* ('ornamented with serpents') is often linked to the sword's blade but in fact must refer to the hilt, since the blade had dissolved in Grendel's mother's blood:³⁶ the Staffordshire Hoard offering ample proof of such hilt fittings, made from gold and knotted with snakes (Fig. 19; see pp. 86–8). Despite lacking its most functional component, the hilt retains its value and becomes a treasure in its own right; and not just any treasure – but a trophy commemorating Beowulf's most perilous victory, and a present fit for no less than King Hrothgar himself.³⁷ Other references to hilts are yet more forensic, defining their individual parts. In one poem the Old Norse word *meðalkafl* appears to describe a hand-grip clutched by the Norwegian king Óláfr Haraldsson (c. 1015–28) before battle;³⁸ on a finer level still, skaldic

³² Glúmr.Grá.10; Tindr Hallkelsson, *Hákonardrápa* 4.

³³ Hatto, 'Snake-Swords', p. 148.

³⁴ *Ecghete* ('edge hate'): *Beowulf*, lines 84 and 1738, and *The Seafarer*, line 70; *ecgþræce* ('edge pressure'): *Beowulf*, line 596; *ecgplega* ('edge play'): *Judith*, line 246; *gelacu ecgum* ('clash of edges'): *Beowulf*, line 1168.

³⁵ Glúmr.Grá.7; Þorbjörn hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)* 19; *Maxims I*, line 125; *Beowulf*, lines 1677, 1900 and 2191; *Maldon*, line 166; *Eyv.Laus.1.5*

³⁶ *Beowulf*, lines 1677–98.

³⁷ Literature experts have also identified this hilt as a crucial plot device in the poem, used to transmit messages about its broader themes and motifs – hinting further, perhaps, at the value of this sword component in early medieval minds: Hines, 'Literary Sources', pp. 976–7; James Paz, *Nonhuman Voices in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Material Culture* (Manchester, 2017), ch. 1.

³⁸ *Sigv.EÓH.9*; Cleasby and Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *meðal-kafl*. The grip is ornamented with gold. Interestingly a sword that Óláfr uses later in the poem is also decorated with gold, implying that the poet refers to the same weapon (*Sigv.EÓH.16*).

kennings mentioning nails and rivets may evoke the fixings that linked hilt parts together.³⁹

Unlike blades, hilts were not regularly invoked as synonyms for swords. The best candidate for this may be the Norse shield kenning *skjers halta* ('skerry of hilts'), in which 'hilts' seems to connote an entire sword in the way that 'edge' may have done;⁴⁰ but more typically, kennings mentioning hilts tend to pair them up with blades, as in Old Norse *harðfœtr hjalta* ('hard limbs of hilts'),⁴¹ *malmr mætra hjalta* ('precious metals of hilts')⁴² and *tungur véttrima* ('tongues of sword-grip mounts').⁴³ The implication seems to be that a sword was not a sword without a blade. Another case in which a hilt fitting has been treated as a sword synonym concerns the Old Norse term *hringr* ('ring').⁴⁴ In the battle kenning *þing hrings* ('assembly of ring'),⁴⁵ warrior kennings *meiðr hrings* ('tree of ring') and *hringberendr* ('ring bearer'),⁴⁶ and the description of Hildir as *hristi-Sif hringa* ('ring-shaking Sif') in Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*, *hringr* is often translated as 'sword', specifically 'ring-sword'.⁴⁷ Ring-swords pre-date skaldic verse by centuries and none are yet known from a contemporary archaeological context, so it is worth interrogating the meaning of 'ring' more closely. It may reflect a cultural memory of ring-swords as hallowed objects from past generations⁴⁸ so that in time 'ring' became shorthand for 'ring-sword' and eventually for 'sword' more generally. Alternatively, *hringr* may have

³⁹ *Naglfar* ('nail-riveted one': Bragi inn gamli Boddason, *Ragnarsdrápa* 5); *slíðrúkaðar siglur samnagla* ('sheath-covered masts of the rivet': ÞjóðA.Frag.3)

⁴⁰ Þórðr Kolbeinsson, *Eiríksdrápa* 16.

⁴¹ Eyv.Hák.6.

⁴² Glúmr.Grá.7.

⁴³ Bjkrepp.Mag.10. *Véttrim/vættrim* has also been interpreted as the fuller on a sword blade, but 'grip mounts' seems likelier based on the context in which *véttrim* appears: the imagery of this kenning works because a blade can appear like a long 'tongue' poking out of a hilt whereas the alternative reading of 'fuller' creates the baffling image of a blade poking out of a groove in a blade (Fuglesang, *Some Aspects*, p. 157; Oakeshott and Peirce, *Swords*, p. 43; Cleasby and Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *vætt-rim*; Ellis Davidson, *The Sword*, pp. 179–80; Falk, *Altnordische Waffenkunde*; Gade, *Poetry*, p. 404; Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga* (Oxford, 1991), p. 71.

⁴⁴ Gade, *Poetry*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Halldórr ókristni, *Eiríksflokkur* 8.

⁴⁶ Sigv.EÓH.24; Þhorn.Har.1.

⁴⁷ Brag.Rag.8: Alison Finlay, trans., *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway* (Leiden, 2004), p. 130; Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Sǫrla Þáttr: The Literary Adaptation of Myth and Legend', *Saga-Book* 26 (2002), pp. 38–66 at p. 51.

⁴⁸ This theory finds support beyond the skaldic corpus in the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, which in stanzas 8 and 9 describes a sword with a ring attached to its hilt. This startling anachronism offers a further hint that knowledge of, and respect for, ring-swords significantly outlasted their period of general usage: John Hines, 'Eddic Poetry and Archaeology', *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 212–30 at p. 215; Birger

signalled other war-gear, such as a circular shield or mail-armour made from thousands of tiny rings: both make sense in the kennings quoted above. Finally, *hringr* may simply have meant 'ring' in some cases. Hildir, Bragi's 'ring-shaking Sif', also carries a *baugr* – another word for 'ring' – connoting a neck-ring that is central in her tale; so the *hringr* she shakes in Bragi's kenning may be this neck-ring rather than a sword.⁴⁹ This is not to say that 'ring' should never be translated as 'sword': in some poems it offers the best option. Instead, these analyses remind us of the tapestry of meanings behind each and every word used in poetry, and the importance of context when unravelling their sense. By that token, the arduous journey from *hringr* via 'ring on hilt', to 'hilt', thence to 'ring-sword' before arriving finally at 'sword' may be an unnecessary one. In skaldic verse, swords and rings function similarly as rewards given by leaders to warriors, meaning that both could symbolise favour, loyalty and personal status. As such, they may have become synonymous in poetry, so that an audience member would understand 'ring' immediately as 'sword' with no poetic middle-man. Certainly, by the thirteenth century, Icelander Snorri Sturluson listed *hringr* as a substitute for 'sword' in his *Skáldskaparmál*, a study of poetic language, including it also in his catalogue of terms (*þulur*) for the weapon.⁵⁰

The forensic detail with which sword blades and hilts are often characterised in poetry betrays an intimate knowledge of the weapons, both on the part of the poet (who needed to create such imagery) and the audience (who needed to understand it). It suggests that these components aroused the most interest, fuelling the creativity behind such vibrant descriptions and in turn signalling that they were considered as the most important and defining parts of swords. The slight variance in treatment between blades and hilts is instructive about what swords were, conceptually, in early medieval minds. In this, poetry echoes the idea of 'blade plus hilt' evoked in art (see above, pp. 23–9): while blades could act as poetic shorthand for an entire sword, hilts were usually presented as a component of the whole. Poetry permits us to drill even further into this notion. Blade imagery focuses on experiential aspects of swords, eliciting their form, sharpness, materiality and manufacture, while hilt imagery centres on swords' visual qualities and decoration. This conjures a vague impression that the blade was analogous to a sword's 'body' while the hilt was its

Nerman, *The Poetic Edda in the Light of Archaeology* (Coventry, 1982 [1931]), pp. 41–4.

⁴⁹ Rolf Stavnem, 'The Kennings in *Ragnarsdrápa*', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 14 (2004), pp. 161–84 at p. 178.

⁵⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, verse 457; on *þulur* see Elena A. Gurevich, 'Þulur in *Skáldskaparmál*: An Attempt at Skaldic Lexicology', *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 107 (1992), pp. 35–52.

‘face’ – approaching notions of personification, another key theme surrounding swords in poetry.

Swords as Persons

Personification, or the attribution of human traits to inanimate objects, is one of the most arresting aspects of early medieval vernacular poetry. The most celebrated manifestation of this phenomenon is naming. Named swords are distinctly Old English in flavour, with swords called Mimming, Hrunting, Nægling and possibly Hunlafing immortalised in verse.⁵¹ Skalds seem not to have named swords outright, but rare terms applied to certain swords could be interpreted as names – indeed, some are used as such in later sagas. Several of these terms may refer to mythological swords whose names had become synonymous with the weapons. This seems likeliest where the ‘name’ is applied generally rather than to specific swords, as in the battle kennings *senna leggbita* (‘bickering of Leg-biters’) and *bágr Ságu rifjunga* (‘strife of the Sága [=Valkyrie] of Rib-tearers’);⁵² or where it occurs across different poems by different poets describing different weapons, as in the warrior kenning *lundr Laufa* (‘tree of Laufi’) and battle kenning *veðr Laufa* (‘storm of Laufi’).⁵³ However, when applied more specifically, other terms could denote true named swords. In *Haraldsdrápa*, Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson wields *týrfingr* (‘finger of Týr’):⁵⁴ perhaps a synonym since the name appears in the Eddic poem *Hervararkviða* and later sagas, but a more optimistic reading is that Haraldr named his sword after one he knew from mythology. Similarly, *skelkingr* (‘fearful one’), the sword of jarl Þorfinnr Sigurðarson of Orkney (c. 1009–65) in *Þorfinnsdrápa*, may be named after a troll in Norse tradition.⁵⁵ The most compelling cases for sword names occur where a potential name describes a specific weapon owned by a specific individual and recurs throughout a poem, or better still, beyond it. Thus, in *Magnússdrápa*, King

⁵¹ Experts are divided over whether ‘Hunlafing’, mentioned in *Beowulf*, line 1143, refers to a sword or a human being (R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds, *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Toronto, 2008), p. 190; Nicholson, ‘Hunlafing’, especially pp. 52–3; Brady, “‘Weapons” in *Beowulf*, pp. 96–101). Some argue that the term ‘battle light’ (*hildeleoma*) is the name of the sword mentioned in the relevant passage, but this could be a simple kenning instead (Fulk et al., *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, p. 190; *Beowulf*, line 2583). In any case, ‘Hunlafing’'s ambiguous identity is instructive because both interpretations – human or sword – are credible.

⁵² Hókr.*Eirfl.*4; Glúmr.*Grá.*6.

⁵³ Bjkrepp.*Mag.*11; Eskál.*Vell.*10.

⁵⁴ Diana Whaley, ‘Translation and Commentary on Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Haraldsdrápa*’, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2, Part 1*, ed. Kari Ellen Gade (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 260–80 at p. 260.

⁵⁵ Arn.*Þorf.*5; *Ketils saga hængs* 5.

Magnús inn góði ('the Good', c. 1035–47) fights with *hneitir* ('Cutter'),⁵⁶ a sword that Einarr Skúlason and Snorri Sturluson later record in the ownership of Magnús' father, Óláfr Haraldsson.⁵⁷ One could extrapolate that Magnús inherited the weapon, meaning that the *hneitir* in the poem could well be a historical named sword. Alas, this is hard to confirm: first, both Skúlason and Sturluson write that a Byzantine warrior took the sword after Óláfr's death and not that it passed to Magnús; and second, the most promising sword names – including *Hneitir* – all feature in the poems of a single skald, Arnórr Þórðarson – raising the possibility that he was not recording genuine sword names, but simply had a penchant for obscure sword vocabulary. The matter lies open, for now.

Another way in which poets personify swords is by describing their histories and reputations in ways that echo those of human warriors. Thus, Mimming, Waldere's sword, has cut through countless enemies and will not fail anyone capable of wielding it.⁵⁸ In *Beowulf*, the sword (perhaps) called 'Hunlafing' is *billa selest* (the 'best sword') with notorious edges;⁵⁹ battle-hardened Hrunting has never faltered in a fight;⁶⁰ and Nægling, Beowulf's own sword, has served him flawlessly since youth and the two are destined to fight together as long as they both shall last.⁶¹ This emphasis on a sword's track record intersects with another theme observed in art and archaeology: the value associated with age.

Old swords are often paired with figures of special status and the transactions they made between themselves. On two occasions Beowulf is rewarded with swords that were the heirlooms of kings: the first belonging to Healfdene of the Danes, and the second to Hrethel of the Geats. In turn, Beowulf gives lord Hrothgar the extraordinary weapon from Grendel's mere, itself an ancient treasure. The poet also describes Prince Unferth's sword Hrunting as old, while Beowulf's elite warband vow to defend him with *ealde lafe* ('ancient heirlooms'), qualified as *guðbilla* ('war-swords') when Grendel attacks.⁶² In *The Battle of Maldon*, Essex ealdorman Byrhtnoth offers his enemies a tribute of *ealde swurd* ('ancient swords'), a phrase also applied to Abraham's and God's swords in the Old English *Exodus*.⁶³ However, the clearest expression of a link between old swords and personal status is the rise in standing experienced by Beowulf's sentry when he receives an ancient weapon as a reward.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Arn.Mag.13.

⁵⁷ Einarr Skúlason, *Geisli* 43 (twelfth century); Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga* 213 (thirteenth century).

⁵⁸ *Waldere*, lines 2–5.

⁵⁹ *Beowulf*, lines 1143–5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 1457–64.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, lines 2498–509.

⁶² *Ibid.*, lines 794–805 and 1488–9.

⁶³ *Maldon*, lines 45–7; *Exodus*, lines 408 and 495.

⁶⁴ *Beowulf*, lines 1900–4.

Skaldic verse contains fewer explicit references to old swords. A *Lausavísa* by Eyvindr Finnsson exclaims *fôum til fornara vâpna fljótt* ('let us wield ancient weapons at once'),⁶⁵ perhaps alluding to swords; and Óttarr svarti's *Hofuðlausn* tells how *éarnhringar*, a term translated variously as 'iron swords', 'old iron swords' or even 'far-famed swords', were destroyed in a battle.⁶⁶ Other references require even more optimistic translation. Brady felt the Old English sword terms *mece* and *bill*, mentioned earlier, referred to Roman types;⁶⁷ if so, the Norse equivalent *mækir* could carry similar connotations. Viking-period references to gold-trimmed swords may denote older weapons since gold fittings were rare by that time⁶⁸ – but they could equally reference gilded or copper-alloy pieces, which were less so. The jury stays out, but it is intriguing to note that heirloom swords in *Beowulf* are often called *mece* or *bill*,⁶⁹ while Byrhtnoth's 'ancient sword' in *The Battle of Maldon* is a *bill* with a *fealohilte* ('yellow hilt').⁷⁰

Beowulf offers a small clue as to why ancient swords were so coveted. The word *ærgod* ('time-proofed' or 'good from old times'), applied to swords in the poem,⁷¹ suggests that an old sword was a reliable sword. It was proven in battle, had a stellar reputation and could be trusted at the critical moment – far more so than a brand new one whose mettle (and metal) was untested. Some of this imagery could be poetic trope: Hrunting's reliability foreshadows its failure against Grendel's mother,⁷² while *Beowulf*'s pledge to fight for as long as *Nægling* lasts comes true when it breaks in his fatal encounter with the dragon. However, tropes only work if the audience recognises their implications for the drama: a seasoned sword failing would have been a shocking incident that could

⁶⁵ Eyv.*Laus*.1.

⁶⁶ Respectively Jan Ragnar Hagland and Bruce Watson, 'Fact or Folklore: The Viking Attack on London Bridge', *London Archaeologist* 12 (2005), pp. 328–33 at p. 331; Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 2001), p. 28; Lee Hollander, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin, TX, 1995), p. 253. For the poem, see Jonathan Grove, 'Recreating Tradition: Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Vikingarvísur* and Óttarr svarti's *Hofuðlausn*', *Á austroega. Saga and East Scandinavia. Preprint Papers of the 14th International Saga Conference Uppsala, 9th–15th August 2009 – Volume II*, ed. Ney, Agneta, Williams, Henrik and Charpentier Ljungqvist, Fredrik (Gävle, 2009), pp. 327–35 at pp. 327–9.

⁶⁷ Brady, "'Weapons'" in *Beowulf*, pp. 90–2.

⁶⁸ Ann Williams, *The World before Domesday: The English Aristocracy, 900–1066* (London, 2008), pp. 105–6. The gold-trimmed Bedale hilt, dating to the ninth century, reminds us that such swords were being made albeit probably infrequently; references to gold may thus have alluded to a sword's rarity rather than its age: Brunning, 'Sword Hilt Fittings'.

⁶⁹ *Beowulf*, lines 794–805, 1520 and 2036–7.

⁷⁰ *Maldon*, lines 162 and 166.

⁷¹ Respectively, Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf* (London, 2000), and Clark-Hall, *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *ærgod*; *Beowulf*, lines 989 and 2586.

⁷² *Beowulf*, line 1532.

only herald bad things. These perceptions of swords need not have been fabricated from nothing but were likely to have been rooted in reality.

Animated Swords

One category of poetic imagery reaches beyond person-like swords to present them as living, animated beings. In *Beowulf*, Hrunting sings *agol graedig guðleoð* ('a greedy war-song') when fighting Grendel's mother,⁷³ while skalds frequently characterise battles as the *rødd* ('voice') or *søngr* ('song') of swords.⁷⁴ Björn krepphendí deftly blends a description of blades as tongues with the sound of their wailing in battle to craft a striking vision of swords as voiced beings.⁷⁵ A rarer form of imagery depicts swords experiencing feelings and emotions. In the battle kenning *hrøt sorgar byrgis bōðvar* ('incitement of the sorrow of the fence of battle'), the 'fence of battle' is a shield and its 'sorrow' is a sword, giving ultimately 'incitement of the sword'. The result is a picture of swords impelled to battle, like warriors – although the kenning hints that human feelings were not restricted to swords, since the shield itself feels sorrow.⁷⁶ More promising is the Old English poem *Maxims II*, which declares *ecg sceal wið hellme / hilde gebidan* ('the sword must experience battle, blade opposing helmet');⁷⁷ the spear, by contrast, is said to belong in the hand and the shield boss on the shield to protect its wielder's fingers⁷⁸ – they are their owners' property and servants, and are not shown to be capable of feeling or behaving in the manner that swords could.⁷⁹

In these references, swords are cognate with human beings. Elsewhere their behaviour is more beastly. Swords become snakes in kennings like *linnr sára* ('serpent of wounds') and *linnr éla Yggs* ('serpent of the storms of Yggr [=battle]'),⁸⁰ elsewhere they are fish, as in *bensíkr* ('wound-salmon') and *hræbirtingr* ('corpse-sea-trout');⁸¹ or even dogs, as in *hjalmgagarr* ('helmet dog') and *gagarr seilar* ('dog of shield').⁸² Swords are often shown

⁷³ *Ibid.*, lines 1521–2.

⁷⁴ *rødd hjorvar* ('voice of swords'): Guthormr sindri, *Hákonardrápa* 8; *søngr sverða* ('singing of swords'): *Liðsmannaflokk* 4 and *Eskál.Vell.*18; also Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Þorfinnsdrápa* 9 and *Har.*3; Bersi Skáld-Torfuson, *Flokk* about Óláfr helgi 2. The noun *søngr* alternatively could denote music rather than a human voice: see Cleasby and Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *søngr*.

⁷⁵ *tungur vétrima umðu* ('the tongues of hilt fittings wailed'): Björkr Mag.10.

⁷⁶ *Eskál.Vell.*4. The sword kenning *váði lindar* ('distress of the linden shield') expresses a similar idea: Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson, *Lausavísa* 2a.

⁷⁷ *Maxims II*, lines 16–17.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, lines 21–2, 37–8.

⁷⁹ Cf. Paul Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 165.

⁸⁰ Bersi.Flokk.3; *Eskál.Laus.*2a; Ött.Hof.8.

⁸¹ Gsind.Hák.7; Tindr.Hák.6.

⁸² *Darraðarljóð* 3; Tindr.Hák.4.

biting their enemies,⁸³ while in *Exodus* Abraham's sword is said to have 'roared' when drawn – the Old English verb being *grymetan*, applied typically to animal sounds.⁸⁴ The most popular beasts used in kennings are good matches for swords: snakes are long, shiny, weave around, slide into holes, bite and shed their skin as a sword sheds its scabbard; fish can be long, silvery, dart about and may also bite; and dogs have sharp teeth that puncture the skin. It is easy to see why poets created these analogies.

Less obviously 'living' but still dynamic are elemental forces. Many Old Norse kennings describe swords as fire⁸⁵ or light,⁸⁶ echoed in the Old English *Finnsburh* fragment with its dramatic tableau of a hall ablaze with *swurdleoma* ('sword light') during a battle.⁸⁷ Swords also dominate skaldic kennings presenting battles as tumultuous meteorological events, usually snow storms or blizzards of swords⁸⁸ but also more generic storms or winds of swords.⁸⁹ An Old English parallel, *sweordræs* ('sword storm'), appears in *Fates of the Apostles*.⁹⁰ To these may be added *flaumr sverða* ('eddy of swords') and *straumr mækis* ('tide of swords'), which style battles as roiling masses of swords.⁹¹

The likening of swords to humans, animals and natural forces infuses them with a sense of life in the poem, but their behaviour is often linked to a human director. In the broader context of their poem, more than half of 'living' swords are being wielded by warriors. The sword kenning *linnr sára* ('serpent of wounds')⁹² implies animation since the sword appears as a living snake; but in fact it is part of the longer warrior kenning *sveigir linns sára* ('swinger of the serpent of wounds'), creating an alternative portrait of the sword under third party control.⁹³ Similarly, the sword in the kenning *snarpar slíðrtungur* ('keen sheath tongues') is being

⁸³ Old English: *Beowulf*, lines 1521–2; *Riddle* 5, line 9. Old Norse: Arn.*Þorf.*16; Eyv. *Hák.*5; Hfr.*EÓT.*15 and 24; Magnús inn góði Ólafsson, *Lausavísa* 3; Sigv.*EÓH.*16; Sigv.*Vik.*6; ÞjóðA.*Mag.*8.

⁸⁴ *Exodus*, line 408; Peter J. Lucas, *Exodus* (Exeter, 1994), p. 127, n. 408b.

⁸⁵ Eskál.*Vell.*7, 19, 28, 30 and 32–3; Gsind.*Hák.*2, 6 and 8; Ótt.*Höf.*19; Skúli Þorsteinsson, *Poem about Svöldr* 4–5; Tindr.*Hák.*1; Glúmr.*Grá.*2 and 8; Eyjólfur dádaskáld, *Bandaðrápa* 1 and 7; Eskál.*Laus.*3a; Eyv.*Hák.*7.

⁸⁶ Bjkrepp.*Mag.*7; Hallv.*Knúts.*3; Hókr.*Eirfl.*1 and 4; Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Sexstefja* 3; Eyv.*Laus.*4; Hharð.*Laus.*7. Old English examples appear in *Beowulf*, lines 1143, 1523 and 2583.

⁸⁷ *Finnsburh*, line 35.

⁸⁸ *él, drif*: Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Rögnvaldsdrápa* 1 and Þorf.20; Glúmr. *Grá.*11; ÞjóðA.*Frag.*2.

⁸⁹ *hríð* or *hregg*: Eskál.*Vell.*10; Jórunn skáldmætr, *Sendibitr* 5. *Vindr*: Hfr.*EÓT.*24. To this may be added the yet more generic *veðr*, 'weather of swords': Eskál.*Vell.*10 and 12; Vigf.*Laus.*

⁹⁰ Line 59. The key word *ræs* can also signify an attack rather than anything meteorological: Clark-Hall, *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *ræs*.

⁹¹ Brag.*Rag.*3; Eyv.*Hák.*8.

⁹² Bersi.*Flokk.*3.

⁹³ The connection between swords and snakes is discussed by Brunning, '("Swinger of) the Serpent"'.

made to sing (*lét syngva*) by its wielder and is thus, again, controlled by a human agent.⁹⁴ There are, however, a small group of cases in which swords seem to perform independently. Swords are conspicuous where battles are portrayed as contests between weapons rather than warriors *wielding* weapons: in the Old English *Andreas* and *Judith*, for instance, battle is characterised as the grinding down or hacking of shields by swords.⁹⁵ Elsewhere swords, not warriors, receive credit for victories. In *The Battle of Brunanburh* the greatest number of men in memory, including five kings, are said to have been slain *sweordum* ('by swords')⁹⁶ and in *Beowulf* Hygelac is killed *hiorodryncum* ('by sword drinks'),⁹⁷ powerfully translated by Heaney as the sword 'slaking its thirst' on his blood.⁹⁸ Similarly the dragon is felled not by Beowulf and Wiglaf, but by their weapons' edges (*hyne ecg fornám*);⁹⁹ an image echoed in skaldic verse by Steinn Herdísarson's description of how *brandr hrauð af sér rauðu blóði* ('the blade shed red blood')¹⁰⁰ at the Battle of Nissan in 1062, where he may have fought personally. It is possible that these sorts of references to swords were intended to work as abbreviations for warriors, similar to solo weapon motifs in art discussed in Chapter 1; but they may also hint at an idea of autonomous swords, which perhaps existed in certain corners of some early medieval minds.

While these poetic images are compelling, they are not all restricted to swords, signalling that some may have been part of a wider vocabulary of perception rather than evidence for specific views of swords. For instance, spears and arrows become *hildenædran* ('serpents of battle') in two Old English poems,¹⁰¹ while spears also sing or shout in the Old English *Widsith* and the skaldic poems *Vellekla* and *Battle of Svǫldr*.¹⁰² Other weapons also characterise stormy battle kennings, as in the Old Norse *hríðir orvar* ('blizzard of arrows')¹⁰³ and *veðr boga* ('weather of bows').¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Meissner remarked upon the challenge of distinguishing sword from spear kennings in some poems.¹⁰⁵ Thus, although swords are common reference points in these kinds of poetic flourishes, perceptions of these weapons must be interpreted alongside an appreciation of their broader context.

⁹⁴ Glúmr. *Grá*.3.

⁹⁵ *billum forgrundum*: *Andreas*, lines 412–14; *sweorde geheawen*: *Judith*, line 294.

⁹⁶ *Brunanburh*, lines 28–30 and 68.

⁹⁷ *Beowulf*, lines 2358–9.

⁹⁸ Heaney, *Beowulf*; cf. Fulk et al., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. 243.

⁹⁹ *Beowulf*, lines 2772 and 2828: although *Beowulf* uses a single-edged seax rather than a two-edged sword.

¹⁰⁰ Steinn Herdísarson, *Nizarvísur* 4.

¹⁰¹ *Elene*, lines 119 and 141; *Judith*, line 222.

¹⁰² *Widsith*, line 128; *Eskál. Vell.*35; *Skúli. Svǫ.*2.

¹⁰³ Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Hrynhenda*, *Magnússdrápa* 14.

¹⁰⁴ *Brag. Rag.*8.

¹⁰⁵ Meissner, *Die Kenningar*, p. 145.

Swords and Their Wielders

Swords and warriors are universal companions in the world of poetry. Kennings pairing warriors with weapons typically refer to swords, challenging received wisdom that spears were more definitive of warriorhood.¹⁰⁶ Most of these kennings appear in skaldic verse and describe the individual honoured by the poem, usually a high-status figure who was likely to own a sword; but the pattern is matched in battle kennings describing groups of general warriors. The implication is that swords were perceived as a defining attribute of warriors, regardless of social standing. This emerges also from the fact that the primary context for swords in poetry is as weapons (echoing a theme in art: see p. 36): partly a side effect of the verses' martial subject matter but also congruent with the matching of swords and warriors in kennings.

Even when depicted in non-violent contexts, swords are indivisible from warriors because most of these contexts comprise the gifting of swords in conjunction with military service. Thus, Beowulf gains a sword for ridding Heorot of Grendel; he pledges his own sword to Unferth if he fails to return Hrunting; he gives Hrothgar the golden hilt hard-won from the mere before rewarding his sentry with a fine sword; Hygelac honours Beowulf's victories with a sword from his armoury; and Wiglaf recollects gaining his sword from Beowulf, lamenting that none will be given now Beowulf is dead.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the eponymous heroine in the Old English *Judith* receives the sword and armour of Holofernes, the Assyrian tyrant, after slaying him, and in *Waldere*, Widia, son of Weland, acquires a sword in return for martial service.¹⁰⁸ Old Norse poems describe similar gifts: the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri ('Fine-hair', c. 872–930) gives his skalds silver-trimmed swords with gilded straps,¹⁰⁹ while Bersi Skáld-Torfuson tells how he would accept a fine sword if his king deigned to give him one.¹¹⁰ Luckier skald Brynjólfr úlfaldi boasted how a king *gaf mér brand ok Vettaland* ('gave me a sword and Vettaland')¹¹¹ and Hallfreðr Óttarson celebrated a gift that made him *sverðauðigr* ('sword-rich').¹¹² These presents may have thanked skalds for their compositions rather than martial escapades, but as skalds were often warriors too,¹¹³ the link to fighters remains. The emerging picture is that swords were considered

¹⁰⁶ DeVries, *Norwegian Invasion*, p. 218; Pedersen, 'Viking Weaponry', pp. 204–6; Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁷ *Beowulf*, lines 1023, 2154, 1659ff, 1901, 2191–4, 2637 and 2886.

¹⁰⁸ *Judith*, lines 334–9; *Waldere* 2, lines 1–10.

¹⁰⁹ Þjóð.Har.19.

¹¹⁰ Bersi.Laus.1; Poole, *Viking Poems*, p. 95.

¹¹¹ The king may have been Óláfr Haraldsson: *Óláfs saga Helga* 62.

¹¹² Hfr.Laus.11.

¹¹³ Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Nesjavísur* 1; Þorgils fiskimaðr, *Lausavísa* 1.

inseparable from warriors, their activities and interactions, both on and off the battlefield.

Swords did not only distinguish warriors from civilians in poems; they also marked a boundary between types of warrior, separating those who fought with swords from those who did not (paralleled in art, pp. 47–50). Skaldic kennings often characterise warriors as ‘reddeners’ of swords but only rarely of spears, implying that the former was more desirable.¹¹⁴ Perhaps more tellingly, the only god to be matched with swords in the analysed sword kennings is Odin – the greatest of all, and the very god of war.¹¹⁵ Three episodes in *Beowulf* offer a fascinating longer-form study of competing warrior identities, all three comparing two groups of men – one courageous, one not – and their relationship with swords comprises the difference between them.¹¹⁶ In the first episode, Prince Unferth queries Beowulf’s story of his duel with Breca. The hero responds by narrating his exploits in detail, specifying repeatedly that he achieved them with a sword until, eventually, the passage grows dense with imagery of Beowulf and his sword working in unison. He signs off by quipping that Unferth has never performed such feats with a sword – insinuating that he is incapable or unworthy of doing so.¹¹⁷ The same accusation resonates in the second episode, when Unferth’s sword Hrunting fails against Grendel’s mother. The partnership between warrior and sword in the poem means that the latter often becomes a mirror of the former, so that Unferth’s heroic deficiencies here manifest in his sword’s lacklustre performance.¹¹⁸ The opposite effect occurs in the third episode when Wiglaf, the only member of Beowulf’s warband to stand by him during his gravest peril, wields his sword effectively against the dragon.¹¹⁹ The fact that Wiglaf’s sword succeeds where Unferth’s failed has been read as a comment on the

¹¹⁴ Swords: *Liðs*.3; *Arn.Har*.2; *Arn.Mag*.1–2 and 9; *Arn.Þorf*.5 and 8; *Bjkræpp.Mag*.2; *Glúmr.Grá*.5; *Mgóð.Laus*.2; *ÞjóðA.Mag*.19. Spears: *Steinn Herðisarson, Óláfsdrápa* 13; *Þorleikr fagri, Flokkir about Sveinn Úlfsson* 3.

¹¹⁵ *Eskál.Vell*.11, 19 and 28; *Ött.Hof*.8; *Tindr.Hák*.1; *ÞjóðA.Sex*.32.

¹¹⁶ The episodes are Unferth and Beowulf’s argument; Unferth’s loan of Hrunting and its subsequent failure in Beowulf’s hand; and Wiglaf’s rebuke of Beowulf’s retainers. All have been the subject of diverse readings: see Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, pp. 242–56.

¹¹⁷ *Beowulf*, lines 539–86. Carol J. Clover, ‘The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode’, *Speculum* 55 (1980), pp. 444–68, p. 143 notes that Beowulf differs from Unferth because he is a ‘sword-wielder’.

¹¹⁸ Michael J. Enright, ‘The Warband Context of the Unferth Episode’, *Speculum* 73 (1998), pp. 297–337 at pp. 315ff; Hughes, ‘Beowulf’, p. 394; Erin Mullally, ‘Hrethel’s Heirloom: Kinship, Succession, and Weaponry in *Beowulf*’, *Images of Matter: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance – Proceedings of the Eighth Citadel Conference on Literature, Charleston, South Carolina, 2002*, ed. Yvonne Bruce (Newark, DE, 2005), pp. 228–44 at pp. 228ff; Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, pp. 76 and 198–9.

¹¹⁹ *Beowulf*, line 2880.

contrasting loyalty and worthiness of the weapons' owners.¹²⁰ Wiglaf's rebuke of his disloyal comrades, including the comment that neither they nor their kin will ever benefit again from the gift of swords,¹²¹ conveys the notion that they are unworthy of this particular weapon. Indeed, their deteriorating worthiness over the course of the poem may be echoed by changes in their armament: they fight with swords when defending Beowulf from Grendel but carry spears after abandoning him to the dragon.¹²² Perhaps the poet felt that at this, their most cowardly moment, it was inappropriate to equip them with the swords they had used at their most heroic, protecting their lord as they had sworn to do.

The superiority of sword warriors to other warriors is echoed in a hierarchy of weapons that places swords at the top of the tree. In *The Battle of Maldon*, the Anglo-Saxon warrior Offa praises his sword as *heard* ('tough') and *god* ('good') but his spear is merely a *gar* ('spear').¹²³ Beowulf's swords are *deore* ('dear') and *leoflic* ('beloved'),¹²⁴ possibly alluding to material value but also evoking their preciousness to him personally. Similarly, a sword in an Old English riddle is *leof frean minum* ('dear to my lord'),¹²⁵ and in *Solomon and Saturn*, warriors are warned against drawing their sword on a whim just because its appearance pleases them.¹²⁶ Swords have mastery over other equipment, disintegrating shields and piercing armour,¹²⁷ or torching them in kennings styling swords as the 'fire' of shields, helmets and mail-coats.¹²⁸ The skaldic sword kenning *þél grafninga* ('file of shields') paints a similar picture,¹²⁹ as do kennings in which swords are the 'harm', 'distress' or 'sorrow' (*skóð*) of other war-gear.¹³⁰ An Old English riddle captures the losing side of this barrage, sketching a pitiful portrait of a shield that has been wounded, scarred, exhausted, buffeted and bitten by *homera lafe*, / *heardecg heoroscearp*, *hondweorc smiþa* ('the products of hammers, the hard-edged blade, bloodily sharp, the handiwork of the smiths').¹³¹ A particularly striking example of sword 'favouritism' is Hallfreðr Óttarsson's celebrated *Lausavísa* 11:

*Eitt es sverð þats sverða
sverðauðgan mik gerði.*

¹²⁰ Enright, 'The Warband Context', pp. 315ff.

¹²¹ *Beowulf*, lines 2884–8.

¹²² *Ibid.*, lines 794–7, and 2845–52.

¹²³ *Maldon*, lines 236–7.

¹²⁴ *Beowulf*, lines 561, 1528 and 1805.

¹²⁵ *Riddle* 20, line 2.

¹²⁶ *Lines* 161–9.

¹²⁷ *Sigv.Nes.8*; *Brunanburh*, line 5; *Darr.3*; *Beowulf*, line 1526.

¹²⁸ *Eskál.Vell.30* and 32–3; *Edað.Band.1*; *Glúmr.Grá.2*; *Skúli.Svǫ.4*; *Þórarinn loftunga, Tøgdrápa* 8.

¹²⁹ *Arn.Rǫg.1*.

¹³⁰ *Liðs.3* and 9; Þorleifr jarlsskáld Rauðfeldarson, *Poem about Hákon*.

¹³¹ *Riddle* 5, lines 1–9.

The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe

*fyr svip-Njörðum sverða
sverðótt mun nú verða.
muna vansverðat verða,
(verðr emk þriggja sverða)
jarðar hljótr, at yrði
umbgerð at því sverði.*

'A single sword of swords it is
which made me sword rich.
Before sweeping Njörðrs of swords [=warriors]
it will be thick with swords.
There will be no lack of swords;
I am worth three swords
if there might be a painted
scabbard for this sword.'¹³²

The saga in which the verse is preserved records that it was composed when the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason (c. 995–1000) requested a poem with the word 'sword' in every line: no mean feat given the strictures of skaldic poetry's *dróttkvætt* metre. Hallfreðr's impressive achievement was, appropriately, crowned with a gift of a sword.¹³³

This special regard for swords emerges also from their inclusion in episodes of great import or symbolic power (again mirroring themes in art, pp. 39–41). In *Beowulf*, a peace treaty between Finn and Hengest is ceremonially broken by the laying of a sword across Hengest's lap: an event presaged by a warning that the feud would reopen and close again by the sword's edge.¹³⁴ In the same poem Cain slays Abel with a sword; in *Christ III* God wields *sigemece* ('sword of victory') on the Day of Judgement; and in *Exodus* God closes the parted Red Sea with a strike from his sword.¹³⁵ Swords are the weapon of choice in executions and sacrifice, echoing the same feature in art;¹³⁶ indeed the words *heorudreor* ('sword-blood') and *heorudrync* ('sword-drink') used in *Beowulf* hint that blood spilled by swords was particularly special.¹³⁷ In *The Battle of Maldon*, the poet seems to deploy swords at key moments. While spears and shields are typical war-gear during the fighting, swords appear at salient turning points: the earl Byrhtnoth's nephew Wulfmær is slain by swords; Eadweard avenges

¹³² Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford, 2005), p. 59.

¹³³ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 83.

¹³⁴ *Beowulf*, lines 1142–3, 1104–6 and 1147; Fulk et al., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. 190.

¹³⁵ *Beowulf*, line 1262; *Christ III*, line 1530; *Exodus*, line 495.

¹³⁶ *Beowulf*, line 1939; Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 27–8 and 169. In the cases of Abraham's abandoned sacrifice of Isaac in *Genesis* (lines 2857–8) and Juliana's martyrdom (*Juliana*, line 679), the poets probably follow Biblical tradition.

¹³⁷ *Beowulf*, lines 487 and 849, and lines 2354–9. Cf. Teresi, 'Old English Term', pp. 133–4 and 140.

Wulfmær with his sword; Byrhtnoth is attacked by a Viking who craves his sword; Byrhtnoth drops his sword in his last moments; and Offa incites a final stand with blades and swords.¹³⁸

When seeking to explain why swords and sword-wielders are depicted as superior beings, an obvious answer is social status. Swords were intricate and costly items, available only to those with the means to have them, thus setting them naturally above their lowlier comrades. Indeed, vernacular poetry teems with imagery matching swords with illustrious people, from great heroes to powerful kings – the types of individuals for whom a costly sword was easily attainable. However, a final episode from *Beowulf* offers an alternative reading. Beowulf predicts that Heorot will fall when a fragile treaty between the Danes and Heathobards collapses. He foresees a scenario in which an older warrior goads a younger comrade by pointing out a sword once owned by the youth's father and now worn by his father's killer. The sword's exploits are recalled, its rightful ownership by the son is invoked, and sure enough the young warrior is driven to vengeance, shattering the peace.¹³⁹ His incitement hinges on the special relationship between warriors and swords: the memories of shared adventures, the ability to recognise the weapon, the breaking of its chain of connections, and the emotional attachment felt towards it. This distinctive type of relationship was arguably unique to the owners of swords: no other weapons used by warriors, or circulating in society, performed in quite the same way. Thus, when the sword in this episode is referred to as *dyre iren* ('dear' or 'costly iron'),¹⁴⁰ the context suggests 'dear' in heart rather than price.

In places, the bond between warriors and swords is characterised in ways that resemble comradeship. In Old English, terms for swords include *mægenfultum* ('mighty help') and *hildefrofor* ('comforter in battle'),¹⁴¹ the moment in which Beowulf calls Hrunting *guðwine* ('friend in war') was mentioned earlier, but the term recurs later when the hero, mortally wounded, recalls how his neighbours never dared meet him *guðwinum* ('with friends in war')¹⁴² – an image in which, revealingly, 'warriors' and 'swords' would be equally suitable translations. A comradesly bond is less apparent in Old Norse poetry, perhaps because imagery of warriors relying upon or sharing glory with their swords was unbecoming of its honorific function. However, a *Lausavísa* by Eyvindr Finnsson

¹³⁸ *Maldon*, lines 114, 119, 161, 162–6 and 236–7.

¹³⁹ *Beowulf*, lines 2036–66. See also Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, pp. 242–4; Lee Patterson, 'The Heroic Laconic Style: Reticence and Meaning from *Beowulf* to the Edwardians', *Medieval Literature and Historical Enquiry: Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 133–58 at pp. 141–2; Scott Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 142–4.

¹⁴⁰ *Beowulf*, line 2050.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, line 1455; *Waldere* 2, line 12.

¹⁴² *Beowulf*, line 2735.

crafts a memorable portrait of a king and his sword carving through the enemy, its immediacy enhanced by the sword's characterisation (sharp, wand-like, golden-hilted), the way the king holds it (two-handed), and the damage they wreak together:

*Veitk, at beit enn bitri
byggving meðaldygðvan
bulka skiðs ór bôðum
benvöndr konungs höndum;
ófælinn klauf Ála
éldraugs skarar hauga
gollhjöltuðum galtar
grönduðr Dana brandi.*

'I know that the sharp wound-wand [=sword],
wielded by the king two-handed,
cut the dubiously doughty
dweller on the ski of cargo [=seafarer];
the branch of boar-of-Óli's
bad weather [=warrior], Danes' harmer,
through hair-barrows [=heads] drove down
dauntless, his sword gold-hilted.'¹⁴³

The picture is one of unison between man and sword, achieved by the initial focus upon the sword's action and the subsequent focus on the king's action *with* the sword. It is possible that the poem recounts a famous sword/warrior partnership familiar to the contemporary audience. Sigvatr Þórðarson articulates another comrade-like episode in *Erfridrápa Óláfs helgi*: outnumbered and on the brink of battle, Óláfr Haraldsson clutches the grip of his sword, bound in precious gold.¹⁴⁴ Regardless of whether Óláfr's grasp issued from determination, fear or a need for comfort in battle, the episode neatly illustrates the affiliation between warrior and sword at the moment of combat.

Women and Swords

The preceding discussion has shown that swords were primarily wielded by men in early medieval poetry. Rarely are they linked to women, and when they are – as in art and archaeology – those women are extraordinary. One is Judith, a Biblical heroine in the eponymous Old English poem, who wields a sword against invading Assyrians and decapitates their leader, Holofernes.¹⁴⁵ The poet highlights Judith's unconventionality via heroic diction usually applied to male protagonists: a subtle reminder

¹⁴³ Eyv. *Laus*.5; Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁴ Sigv. *EÓH*.9.

¹⁴⁵ *Judith*, lines 77ff.

that this sword-bearing woman is part of an ‘other’ world.¹⁴⁶ This idea recurs in Old Norse poetry. Bragi Boddason’s Hildir, the ‘ring-shaking Sif’ who may carry a sword, is a powerful woman who raises the dead with magic in later sources, while Sif, to whom she is likened in the kenning, is remembered as a goddess and the wife of Thor.¹⁴⁷ Most sword-bearing women in skaldic verse are Valkyries, those renowned mythical women who brought dead warriors to Valhalla. In *Darraðarljóð*, Valkyries use swords to weave a *sigrvefr* (‘web of victory’) from human entrails.¹⁴⁸ They are referenced in many sword kennings, like *iss Hlakkar* (‘ice of Hlökk’), *gunníss* (‘Gunnr-ice’), *þunníss Gunnar* (‘thin ice of Gunnr’), *Gunnviti* (‘Gunnr-beacon’), *eldar Gøndlar* (‘fires of Gøndul’), and *eisa almdrósar* (‘glowing ember of the bow-maid’).¹⁴⁹ Kennings for Valkyries themselves also refer to swords, as in *sverðman* (‘sword girl’) and *Sága rifjunga* (‘Sága of swords’).¹⁵⁰

The remarkable nature of sword-wielding women may not have been a poetic confection arising from these works’ heightened subject matter. Of thirty-nine Anglo-Saxon wills studied by Dorothy Whitelock, just one records a sword bequeathed by a woman – and this made jointly with her husband.¹⁵¹ In these documents, individual women bequeath other war-gear including spears and shields, but not swords.¹⁵² This is a partial record, since a fraction of Anglo-Saxon wills survive; but their picture corresponds with that of poetry and other sources to confirm that women experienced only tangential relationships with swords.

Perceptions of Swords over Time

The difficulties surrounding the dating of poetry pose challenges to tracing the perception of swords through time: without a reliable chrono-

¹⁴⁶ Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 496. See also Stacy S. Klein, ‘Gender’, *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies*, ed. Jacqueline Stodnick and Renee R. Trilling (Chichester, 2012), pp. 39–52, who reads the poem as a counter-narrative to traditional male militancy and discusses the unwarlike depiction of female ‘warriors’ in Old English hagiography.

¹⁴⁷ Heather O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2004), p. 78.

¹⁴⁸ Darr.1, 3 and 11; for the link between warfare and weaving, see Poole, *Viking Poems*, pp. 136–7; Näsström, ‘Images of the Past’; and Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1981), pp. 14–15. The poem was once thought to describe the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 but is now associated with a tenth-century battle in Ireland: Poole, *Viking Poems*, pp. 120ff.

¹⁴⁹ Hharð.Laus.14; Sigv.Laus.5; Vígfúss Víga-Glúmsson, *Poem about Hákon jarl*; Þloft.Tøg.8; Ött.Höf.19; Gsind.Hák.2.

¹⁵⁰ Hallv.Knúts.3; Glúmr.Grá.6.

¹⁵¹ Dorothy Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (London, 1930), no. 11, ‘Will of Brihtric and Ælfswið’ (c. 973–87).

¹⁵² Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, no. 8, ‘Will of Ælfifu’ (c. 966–75).

logical sequence, it is hard to find authentic signs of change. Most Old English poems survive in eleventh-century manuscripts, when England had long been Christian, making pagan attitudes towards swords more difficult to excavate. This is true even where poems preserve relics of oral traditions:¹⁵³ *Beowulf*, for instance, clearly rests on older tales but was to some degree adapted by Christian poets for Christian audiences. Skaldic verse, however, straddles the pagan and Christian period in Scandinavia, from Bragi Boddason in the earlier ninth century to Björn krepphendí in the later eleventh.¹⁵⁴ These challenges must be engaged with, but it is possible to work within their constraints.

To Bradley, the admiration of swords in Old English poetry reflected the deliberate appropriation of older, heroic themes by those promoting Christian concepts, like the notion of spiritual warfare.¹⁵⁵ Consequently, celebration of these weapons did not become inappropriate in a Christian context: and so in *Waldere*, Hildegýth promises the eponymous warrior that God will protect him, encouraging him to destroy his foe Guthhere by entrusting his life to the sword Mimming.¹⁵⁶ However, in Old Norse poetry, skaldic diction and imagery underwent changes during and after Scandinavia's conversion, a long and regionally-varied process that began in the late tenth century. Pagan references seem to fade in the eleventh century,¹⁵⁷ and depictions of swords changed accordingly. Kennings pairing swords with mythical figures and special plants are largely confined to the earlier eleventh century,¹⁵⁸ while Valkyries vanish after the middle of the century, ignored by the later skalds Arnórr Þórðarson, Þjóðólfr Arnórsson and Björn krepphendí. In one poem, the Valkyrie sword kenning *vǫndr Gjallar* ('wand of Gjöll') is applied to a sword that is abandoned for a pilgrim's staff, embodying a shift from old ways to new.¹⁵⁹ The imagery applied to swords seems to acquire a more Christian flavour in later skaldic poetry. Light was a key motif in medieval Christian literature, associated with holy individuals and the faith itself: hence the twelfth-century poem *Geisli* ('sunbeam'), composed

¹⁵³ Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, pp. xii and xvii; Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Old English Poetry', *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 7–25 at p. 10.

¹⁵⁴ O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 73; Gade, *Poetry*, p. 395.

¹⁵⁵ Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. xvii.

¹⁵⁶ *Waldere* 1, lines 23–6.

¹⁵⁷ Diana C. Edwards, 'Christian and Pagan References in Eleventh Century Norse Poetry: The Case of Arnórr jarlaskáld', *Saga-Book* 21 (1982–3), pp. 34–54; Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'What Have We Lost by Writing? Cognitive Archaisms in Skaldic Poetry', *Oral Art-Forms and Their Passage into Writing*, ed. Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen, 2008), pp. 163–84.

¹⁵⁸ Hildir: Hallv.*Knúts*.3, and Reifnir: Skúli.*Svǫ*.4; leeks and reeds: Hókr.*Eirfl*.3; Liðs.9; Skúli.*Svǫ*.2; ÞKolb.*Eir*.15. The latest is *reyr randa*, 'reed of shields': Arn. *Hryn*.14.

¹⁵⁹ Sigv.*EÓH*.27. Edwards, 'Christian and Pagan', p. 34.

by Einarr Skúlason, likens saint Óláfr Haraldsson to a beam of sunshine illuminating the world with miraculous acts.¹⁶⁰ Light imagery flourishes in Christian-period skaldic verse¹⁶¹ and seems to have influenced sword kennings: between the tenth and eleventh centuries, references to light soar while fire imagery wanes, hinting perhaps that light, with its more Christian overtones, was becoming a more suitable way to evoke shining sword blades.

Also notable is a decline in zoomorphic imagery in sword kennings. The trend could evoke a degree of Christian unease, given the prominence of beasts in the pagan world;¹⁶² but it does not convey discomfort with any concept of 'living' or 'animated' swords. While allusions to swords with 'voices' decline, these were rare anyway – more pertinent is the continued popularity into the eleventh century of kennings pairing swords with living things (body parts, trees), dynamic weather or animated behaviour like harming, stabbing and biting. Christianity does not seem to have nullified the notion of 'living' swords, per se, but it did prompt changes in the imagery applied to them. It may have been so that in a period greatly marked by violence and warfare, perceptions of swords as special, characterful objects were resilient in the face of changing beliefs.

Perceptions of Swords in Space

Old English and Old Norse poetry both converge and depart from each other in their presentation of swords. Both characterise swords by their properties, materials, decoration and components, but skaldic verse refers to a greater array of individual sword parts – conjuring a fuller picture of swords as objects. One reason may be that skalds deployed a wider range of terms to serve the convolutions of skaldic metre: something that may also explain the more diverse references used in skaldic sword kennings, ranging from tools to gods with everything in between. Another possibility is that Scandinavian perceptions of swords were finer than Anglo-Saxon ones in their appreciation of detail: to them, swords were not merely 'blade plus hilt' but a constellation of different parts. Poetic context may be a factor, in that many skalds, their patrons and audiences were

¹⁶⁰ Martin Chase, *Einarr Skúlason's Geisli: A Critical Edition* (Toronto, 2005), pp. 21ff.

¹⁶¹ Nordan, *Tools of Literacy*, p. 293.

¹⁶² Kristina Jennbert, 'The Heroized Dead: People, Animals and Materiality in Scandinavian Death Rituals, AD 200–1000', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions – An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3–7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund, 2006), pp. 135–40; Kristina Jennbert, *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion* (Lund, 2011).

warriors with intimate knowledge of swords who, presumably, may have wished to hear them described more forensically than other social groups did. Indeed, the simpler characterisation of swords in Old English poems may reflect its composition and/or writing down by monks who were less closely informed about the intricate construction of swords – focusing instead on their most obvious (blade) or alluring (hilt fittings) parts.

The idea of ‘living’ swords also differs between Old English and Old Norse poetry. Named swords occur primarily in Old English verse along with most descriptions of swords with personalities and life histories. This could imply that such perceptions were more Anglo-Saxon than Scandinavian in outlook; but kennings tell a different story. Those linking swords with living things or natural forces are common in Old Norse but rare in Old English; none link swords to body parts and far fewer depict swords with voices. The counter-view is that ‘living’ swords were more Scandinavian than Anglo-Saxon in conception. This finds some support in research exploring Scandinavian influence on Old English poetry: for instance, in *Finnsburh* the term *swurdleoma* describing the light emitted from swords may have been an Old Norse-ism, hinting that the similar terms *hildeleoma* and *beadleoma* used in *Beowulf* are too.¹⁶³ So, how might this conflicting evidence be squared? Contrasting poetic styles hold a clue. Old English poems have a linear, narrative structure in which the tale unfolds continuously, characters come and go, and swords appear in both martial and peaceful episodes. Old Norse poetry is more episodic, recounting different deeds in different stanzas with a focus on military events. It therefore offered fewer opportunities for broader, more nuanced depictions of swords than Old English verse, which was able to luxuriate more in its descriptions. Another reading is possible, however. Old English imagery of ‘living’ swords is dominated by names and histories, which ultimately style them as person-like rather than truly animated. Old Norse imagery, conversely, summons a more tangible sense of movement and life for these weapons. Thus, while Old English swords could be like people, only Scandinavian swords really came to life: the difference being tantamount to that between the photograph of a person and their flesh-and-blood presence.

Old English and Old Norse poets both connect swords most closely with men, while female warriors are extraordinary on both sides. The relationship between warrior and sword is more sentimental in England,

¹⁶³ Jonathan Watson, ‘The *Finnsburh* Skald: Kennings and Cruces in the Anglo-Saxon Fragment’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101 (2002), pp. 497–519 at pp. 498–9; Roberta Frank, ‘North-Sea Soundings in *Andreas*’, *Early Medieval Texts and Interpretations: Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg*, ed. Susan Rosser and Elaine Treharne (Tempe, AZ, 2002), pp. 1–11; Roberta Frank, ‘Did Anglo-Saxon Audiences Have a Skaldic Tooth?’, *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987), pp. 338–55, especially p. 348 for Abraham’s ‘roaring’ sword in *Exodus*, line 408.

typified by Beowulf's and Unferth's cogitations on their swords, the son pushed to vengeance by his father's sword, and swords described as friends and comforters in battle. Little equivalent affection emerges from skaldic verse, in which warriors are more likely to redden their swords than ruminate on their relationship with them. Again, this could be due to differing style and function: Old English poetry tends to paint a more tragic, suffering portrait of war and violence while skalds emphasise heroism and glory.¹⁶⁴ Within this, however, is a hint that Scandinavians viewed swords more as tools for battle than emotional companions.

One Old English poem suggests that swords played a role in differentiating Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian cultural identity. *Exodus*, based on the Old Testament book, narrates the conflict between the Egyptians and the Israelites, led by Moses. Only the Egyptians wield swords in the poem, as *heorowulfas* ('sword-wolves')¹⁶⁵ and *sweordwigendas* ('sword-warriors') who slay the Israelites with swords.¹⁶⁶ Moses' men, by contrast, bear *gearwe* ('arms'), shields and spears.¹⁶⁷ The distinction between the sides does not relate to social status, since both groups wear other elite markers such as helmets and mail-armour.¹⁶⁸ Instead, it could indicate cultural difference. *Exodus* may have been composed under Scandinavian influence during the Viking period in England,¹⁶⁹ and as such, the poet may have drawn upon a knowledge of differing armament between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian forces to characterise the opposing cultures in his poem. If so, the sword-bearing Egyptians may correlate with Scandinavians, since both represent the 'enemy' in the worlds of the poem and the poet. There is a chance that this reflects a reality in which Scandinavian warriors really did wield more swords than the Anglo-Saxons – an issue revisited in the following chapter.

* * *

Vernacular poetry from England and Scandinavia conveys tantalising insights into how swords were perceived in the early medieval North. They emerge as dynamic artefacts with qualities similar to those of human beings, animals and the elements, fundamental to warrior identity and superior to other weapons – a superiority that transferred onto their wielders and raised them above their comrades. Indeed, swords themselves appear as comrades in some poems, while a sense of favouritism

¹⁶⁴ John D. Niles, 'Skaldic Technique in *Brunanburh*', *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987), pp. 356–66 at p. 363; Jesch, 'Eagles, Ravens and Wolves', p. 274.

¹⁶⁵ *Exodus*, line 181: cf. Teresi, 'Old English Term' on *heoru*.

¹⁶⁶ *Exodus*, lines 260 and 199.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 59; lines 113, 125, 236, 239 and 301; lines 113, 125, 236, 239 and 301; lines 231, 240, 246 and 251.

¹⁶⁸ Anna Gannon, *The Iconography of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage: Sixth to Eighth Centuries* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 62–3; Härke, "'Warrior Graves'?", p. 26.

¹⁶⁹ Frank, 'Anglo-Saxon Audiences'; cf. Jesch, 'Eagles, Ravens and Wolves', p. 258.

towards these weapons weaves throughout countless verses. This was not all a product of poetic fantasy, or shaped by the strictures of metre: similar themes recur in other written sources with different concerns, functions and structures including chronicles, official documents and, of course, Icelandic sagas. The presentation of swords in prose writings could form a study of its own but a few germane examples are instructive.¹⁷⁰

Swords with distinctive visual identities, echoing the son recognising his father's sword in *Beowulf* and the poetic notion of hilts as 'faces', populate Icelandic sagas. In *Óláfs saga helga*, Óláfr Haraldsson sends his man Björn on an errand to Sweden with a ring and decorated sword, given to him by the Swedish jarl Rognvaldr. Björn was tasked with meeting Rognvaldr who, upon recognising the sword, would help him get a message to the Swedish king.¹⁷¹ This notion may also help to decode an unusual law of the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great (c. 849–99). Its requirement that sword-polishers return their customers' weapons 'unstained' – that is, not used in a criminal act¹⁷² – may have arisen from a specific case, but why would a sword-polisher do this? Perhaps the prospect, or prestige, of using a sword was too appealing to resist; or perhaps swords were so recognisable that a person could don a disguise and use another man's weapon to commit a crime, thereby implicating the sword's owner as the culprit. Both the saga and the law mirror the poetic image of partnership between wielder and sword. Renowned relationships, like those linking Beowulf and Nægling, are also common in the sagas and hint that these ideas endured for centuries after the poems were composed. Examples from *Konungasögur* alone include Hneitir ('Cutter'), Óláfr Haraldsson's sword;¹⁷³ Leggbiti ('Leg-biter'), wielded by Magnús berfœttr;¹⁷⁴ and Kvernbitr ('Quern-biter'), owned by king Hákon inn góði.¹⁷⁵ Hákon gained this gold-hilted weapon from his foster-father, the Anglo-Saxon king Æthelstan, and with him it earned its name by cutting clean through a mill-stone.¹⁷⁶ Snorri Sturluson records that Hákon wore the sword until his dying day.

Many themes explored in this chapter converge in a single Anglo-Saxon will, recording the bequests of ten swords by Æthelstan, son of king

¹⁷⁰ A recent doctoral thesis studies combat in Icelandic saga, including weapons. It was not available at the time of writing but is now published online: Sixt Wextler, 'Combat in Saga Literature: Traces of Martial Arts in Medieval Iceland', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Tübingen (2017).

¹⁷¹ *Óláfs saga helga* 69.

¹⁷² Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents, Volume I: c. 500–1042*, 2nd edn (London, 1979), no. 33, law 19.3 and p. 376, n. 4.

¹⁷³ *Óláfs saga helga* 213; *Hákonar saga Herðibreids* 20.

¹⁷⁴ *Saga Magnús konungs berfætts* 25.

¹⁷⁵ *Haralds saga hins hárfagra* 40; *Saga Hákonar góða* 28.

¹⁷⁶ *Haralds saga hins hárfagra* 40.

Æthelred ‘the Unready’, in 1015.¹⁷⁷ Each weapon is characterised in ways that could have leapt directly from the verses of *Beowulf*, articulating their distinctive visual identities, history of human partnerships and age:

þæs swúrdes mid þam sylfrenan hiltan þe Wulfric worhte (‘the sword with the silver hilt which Wulfric made’)

þæs seolferhiltan swurdes þe Ulfcytel ahte (‘the silver-hilted sword which belonged to Ulfketel’)

þæs swurdes þe Offa cyng ahte (‘the sword which belonged to King Offa’)

þæs malswurdes þe Wiðer ahte (‘the inlaid sword which belonged to Withar’)

þæs swurdes þe seo hand is on gemearcod (‘the sword on which the hand is marked’)

þæs swurdes mid þam þyttedan hiltan (‘the sword with the pitted hilt’)

anes seolforhiltes swurdes (‘a silver-hilted sword’)

þæs sceardan swurdes (‘the notched sword’)

swurðhwitan þæs sceardan malswurdes (‘the notched inlaid sword’).

It is striking, first, that Æthelstan has so many swords to give – by far the most recorded in any surviving Anglo-Saxon will – but in the context of this study it is more pertinent that he knows each and every one of them so intimately. Their characteristics, visual and biographical, enabled him to choose precisely which sword went to which recipient, suggesting in turn that these things really mattered. Intriguingly he gives one more weapon defined merely as *anes swurdes* (‘a sword’), hinting that it had yet to acquire a history or meaning that defined it in Æthelstan’s mind. The sword linked to Offa, King of Mercia (r. 757–96), speaks further to the prestige of antiquity conveyed by the poems. If authentic, this weapon would have been more than two centuries old – and possibly older if, as some have argued, it was the Avar sword which Offa had received from Charlemagne.¹⁷⁸ Æthelstan left it to his brother Eadmund along with another sword, making him the sole recipient of two swords – evoking, perhaps, the degree to which he was cherished by his sibling. These few

¹⁷⁷ Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, no. 20.

¹⁷⁸ Loyn and Percival, *Reign of Charlemagne*, no. 28; Whitelock, *Beginnings*, p. 95. Similar citations occur in the will of Ælfgar, a tenth-century ealdorman who bequeaths a sword received from his son-in-law King Eadmund (Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, no. 2, pp. 6–9); and a letter preserved by William of Malmesbury which recalls King Æthelstan’s receipt of Constantine’s sword (*Gesta Regum Anglorum* 2.6, trans. Roger A. B. Mynors, Rodney M. Thomson and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford, 1998); Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, p. 74).

passages beyond the world of poetry suggest that the portrayal of swords in verse is likely to reflect, in many ways, how real people thought about real swords in the early medieval North.

'Living' Swords

Experience, Identity, Representation

Early medieval art, archaeology and texts communicate in different ways but many of their messages synchronise if compared mindfully within their context and limitations. This book has traced one message across the boundaries traditionally imposed between these sources: in Anglo-Saxon England, swords were the focus of deep and complex feelings, emotions and perceptions. Many they shared with their Scandinavian neighbours, first across the North Sea and then via settlements in Britain itself; others seem to have been culturally distinctive. The prevalence of certain ideas is difficult to reckon where they are confined to an individual source, or cannot be followed confidently from one source to another; but authentic attitudes are likely to exist where different types of evidence appear to sing from the same hymn-sheet.

Perceptions of Swords in the Early Medieval North

Early medieval perceptions of swords were diverse and intricate; but much like the individual strands of an elaborate tapestry, they weave together to form a single overall picture. The entire tapestry presents swords as dynamic, active, 'living' artefacts in early medieval minds. This notion divides into swords perceived as 'person-like' artefacts with an outer visual character and an inner personality or biography; and as active social beings performing roles in their communities that both encompassed and surpassed the purpose for which they were made.

'Person-like' Swords

Art, archaeology and texts all present swords as 'person-like' artefacts with external and internal qualities that echo those of human beings. To begin on the outside, an attribute that emerges with particular vibrancy is distinctive visual identity: swords had physical features that enabled onlookers to recognise them by sight, much as one recognises a human face by its unique features. Poetry and archaeological survivals agree

that hilts were key to a weapon's individuality. Hence, in *Beowulf* the warrior provoked to violence by the sight of his father's sword, as well as the lingering report of the hilt from Grendel's mere, chime not only with genuine swords distinguished by the configuration and decoration of their hilts, but also with the likelihood, conveyed by asymmetrical wear and ornament, that owners wore their swords with the showier face outwards where viewers might recognise it. The theme is more difficult, but not impossible, to trace in art. Despite the occasional distinctive hilt, like Goliath's in the Tiberius Psalter (No. 40, fol. 9), most swords have plain, generic-looking hilts; but context is important here. Most images of hilts are so small that they limited the artist's ability to incorporate complex ornamentation. Artists did, however, distinguish swords from each other by depicting a range of authentic types. Consequently, the juxtaposition of different sword types in the same image – tri-lobed and hemispherical pommels in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, and ring-swords and non-ring-swords on Swedish helmets – reveals artists' awareness that swords looked different from each other, and that difference was conveyed visually by their hilts.

The three sources also broadly agree that swords were thought to possess 'person-like' qualities of a more internal nature. Texts and archaeology emphasise the significance of a sword's reputation, built upon behaviour, associations and history. Poems celebrate weapons' fame and past performances and highlight the importance of quotable human connections: in *Beowulf*, the renowned swords of kings and lords; and in *Waldere* the fact that Mimming was *Welandes worc* ('Weland's work').¹ This was no poetic confection, as the same citations appear in late Anglo-Saxon wills drawn up as official documents by real-world wielders. The perceived 'behaviour' of archaeological swords is harder to recover, but the same desire to preserve information about owners and makers is clear. Their names were inscribed upon sword fittings throughout the period: in runes on weapons from early Anglo-Saxon burials at Ash (Kent) and Chessell Down (Isle of Wight), and in Latin on a tenth-century sword from the River Frome at Wareham (Dorset).² The famous ULFBERHT swords are also relevant, since the counterfeiting of some examples hints that blades inscribed with the name had a coveted reputation that was worth aping for profit. Again, the theme is difficult to trace pictorially – partly because images were, again, too small to permit the inclusion of inscriptions, or perhaps because artists were unfamiliar with such personal details. A fine exception is the

¹ *Beowulf*, lines 1143–5, 1457–64 and 2498–509; *Waldere* 1, line 2.

² MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, p. 35; Elisabeth Okasha and David A. Hinton, 'Appendix Two: The Wareham Sword', *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society* 99 (1977), pp. 42–83; Elisabeth Okasha, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), no. 179, pp. 100–1.

sword of Orion in an Anglo-Saxon manuscript, its blade emblazoned with an ULFBERHT-like inscription (No. 15, fol. 39; Fig. 4).

The value afforded to ancient swords ripples throughout all three sources, from the earliest graves in the fifth century to the latest art in the eleventh. Its clearest expression occurs in images that pair outstanding individuals with old swords, creating a feedback loop of prestige between weapon and wielder. The exhibitionist nature of wear, repairs and modifications on real swords hints that signs of ageing had something important to say – the details of which emerge in poetry. First, old weapons linked chains of people in social transactions at all levels, from family groups to political alliances. In this work, swords became powerful repositories of ancestral pasts, of significant relationships that stabilised social order, on occasion perhaps functioning even as legitimisers of inherited or bestowed responsibilities and power.³ Second, old swords were good in a fight, having racked up battle records that would have been the envy of any human warrior. Surely few fighters would have chosen a brand-new sword, whose weight, balance and effectiveness were a mystery, over one whose behaviour was known inside-out, its hilt worn to the shape of their hand, its exploits etched into the memories of all who had known it over time. In this light, it is easy to appreciate how a weapon that, to us, resembles a dilapidated, mismatched curiosity would have been the most precious treasure one could own – Beowulf's 'time-proofed' 'comforter in battle'.

Art, archaeology and texts all present an image of swords with person-like attributes like visual identity and inner personality. However, they reconcile less happily on another, more sensational, attribute: physicality. Images and poetry both allude to animated swords that act independently of their wielders: the solo sword of Sigurðr carved on stones from northern England and Scandinavia, and swords that sing and go to war in poems from both regions. Does this curious phenomenon signal a belief in autonomous swords, or simply that swords could act as pictorial or literary abbreviations for 'warriors'? The latter would have been a useful tool for artists working with limited space or poets with strict metrical rules. These readings need not be mutually exclusive, however, since the creators' audience may have apprehended both meanings depending on their personal contexts. Moreover, either interpretation still garners insights into the idea of 'living' swords: while an autonomous sword is a dramatic notion, its ability to 'stand in' for a human being hints towards swords functioning as 'extensions of self'. The main stumbling block to exploring the theme further lies with the archaeological evidence. While skeletal preservation varies between the graves analysed for this study, it

³ Williams, *Death and Memory*, especially pp. 20ff; Gosden and Marshall, 'Cultural Biography', pp. 170–1; Lillios, 'Objects of Memory'.

seems unlikely that any contained a sword without a body. Even where little to no human remains survived, as at Sutton Hoo and the boat burials of Uppland, swords were positioned as if a body was interred originally – or, at the very least, was accounted for in its absence by those fitting out the burial. As such, none of the buried swords can be described as truly ‘wielderless’ in the same way as those in art and poetry seem to have been. But what about weapons from rivers and wetlands? Reynolds and Semple argued that a wielder’s negative qualities could infuse his weapon so thoroughly that it must be disposed of after his death in a remote, liminal location like a river or bog.⁴ In this reading, archaeological swords could be viewed as ‘abbreviations’ of their wielders, echoing dimly the presentation of swords in images and poetry.

Swords are not the only weapons that act autonomously across the sources. A drawn bow appears on a Viking coin of York, while spears and shields populate the Oseberg embroideries from Norway; spearheads are commoner river finds than swords;⁵ and battles are depicted as clashes between all sorts of weapons in poems. However, in images and poetry at least, swords are distinctive for being the only type of weapon to be shown in clear, violent action – stabbing through the serpent in Scandinavian Sigurðr imagery. This recurs in Scandinavian poetry, which depicts swords engaged in a far greater range of independent actions than spears. The tentative inference could be that swords, more than any other weapon in the early medieval panoply, were thought capable of ‘coming to life’.

The striking notion of swords as ‘living’ objects revives the most basic question of all: what exactly *was* a sword in the early medieval mind? What distinguished it as an artefact, and to what extent did its qualities shape how it was perceived? The idea that swords were composite artefacts emerges in all three sources, but the various parts receive varying attention, hinting that certain pieces were viewed as more important than others. The three sources broadly agree that blades were the most definitive part: all images of swords incorporate blades; they are emphasised unremittingly in poetry; and in the archaeological record, sword parts were rarely interred in graves independently from a blade. Blades probably loom so large because they are the biggest, most immediate module of these weapons and were fundamental to its primary function. However, hilts also enjoy a high profile across the sources. Many images depict the finer aspects of their structure, including sandwich-like guards, ring fittings and pommel shapes, which is mirrored in the detail that poets afforded to their components and ornamentation. The embellishment and modification of real sword hilts, meanwhile, reveals that owners lavished their attention on this part of their weapon over all others. The hilt from

⁴ Reynolds and Semple, ‘Anglo-Saxon Non-Funerary’.

⁵ Watson, ‘Viking Age River Offerings’, figs 12–14; Raffield, ‘“River of Knives”’, pp. 637–8.

the mere in *Beowulf*, which became a royal trophy, finds archaeological echoes within the Staffordshire and Bedale hoards, combining to offer the strongest evocation that hilts possessed value (material and symbolic) independently of blades. The sources agree less over the significance of scabbards. They possess a low profile in poetry and (to a lesser extent) in art, but archaeology paints an alternative picture in that mineralised wood on the blades of buried swords indicates that they were almost always interred inside their scabbards. It may be the case that scabbards were not easily recycled, since early medieval blades were not morphologically uniform; or it could convey the view that scabbards were essential parts of swords. After all, they enabled owners to wear their weapons, store them safely and preserve them in good condition: the two made an inseparable pair, and it may not have occurred to mourners to divide them at burial. This mundane facet of day-to-day sword ownership would be unlikely to feature in texts and poetry, which may help to explain the discordant prominence of scabbards across the three sources.

The apparent 'hierarchy' of sword parts hints at the pinnacle expression of 'person-like' swords in early medieval minds. Beneath the perceptions discussed above are clues that blades were interpreted as the 'bodies' of swords and hilts as their 'faces', an idea especially prominent in poetry but also detectable more broadly when the sources are juxtaposed. Art, archaeology and verse are all adamant that the hilt formed the focus of a weapon's visual identity: like a human's face, it could be recognised on sight, with unique features unconcealed by 'clothing'; it could be altered and enhanced to tweak that identity, as humans use cosmetics or change hairstyles; and eventually, it demonstrated physical signs of age, like wrinkles and age spots. The blade, by contrast, was less individual for the casual viewer: like a human's body, it was usually concealed beneath 'clothing' (the scabbard) so that only those in its closest circle would see it 'unclothed' regularly enough to recognise its more intimate features. Also like a body, the blade became the storehouse for a sword's reputation and history, embodying the adage that it is what is on the inside (of the scabbard, literally and metaphorically) that counts; and it was the part of the sword that 'did the work', without which it could not perform its tasks. This may also help to clarify why scabbards feature less in art and poetry: whereas artists, poets and their audience would best recognise a sword from its hilt, an owner enjoyed a more holistic appreciation – hilt, blade and scabbard, as a single being.

Swords in Action

The sources concur that swords performed a range of active roles in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian society. Unsurprisingly, violence is the most typical context for swords in art and poetry; archaeology is harder to integrate since it is difficult to confirm if surviving swords had ever seen

action. Corrosion of blades, particularly those from burials, impedes the hunt for battle damage, but increasingly sophisticated scientific methods should help to uncover signs of sharpening and metal loss that may contribute to future discussion.⁶ Other clues of battle use are equivocal. Worn hilt fittings only demonstrate that swords were handled, and not the type of handling; thus, the short blade from grave 27 at Buckland, Dover (No. 118) may have been reshaped after breaking in battle or any type of accident that could be imagined. Many swords from graves have cracked lower guard plates that could be attributed to fighting, since guards were designed to protect the hand from sliding blows. However, the cracks are more likely to be stress fractures caused by the tang's expansion during corrosion, because they usually radiate from the tang-hole to the edge of the guard. This is not to say that no surviving sword can be described as a weapon in the absence of physical proof: these artefacts were made for fighting and we should not be afraid of assuming that most were directed to this purpose during their lives. In this more generous reading, it is possible to align the archaeological evidence with that of art and poetry, and infer that violence was a fundamental part of the sword's role in society.

All three sources demonstrate that swords participated actively in realms beyond the martial. They performed in ritual activity, demonstrated archaeologically by the placing of swords in graves, watercourses and hoards; and textually by poetic references to swords gleaming over graves, on funeral pyres and in hoards.⁷ Watery deposition is evoked by the sword which Beowulf finds in Grendel's mere and in Scandinavian references to rivers flowing with weapons.⁸ A pictorial correlation may be found in the tenth-century warrior carvings from Middleton, North Yorkshire that strongly resemble weapon burials.⁹ Problematically, the most complete image, 'Middleton 2', places the sword high on the body's left side while most contemporary recorded weapon burials located it more centrally on the right – but these images are stylised and may not have been conceived as accurate representations of burial tableaux. Alternatively, the sculptures may have expressed ideas akin to those surrounding *earlier* furnished burial at a time when it had become obsolete;¹⁰ in which case, their imagery intersects with archaeological and poetic descriptions of swords' ritualistic relevance. Other images showing swords used in funerary processions, ritual dances and sacrificial acts can be added here also.

⁶ Lehmann, *Wurmbunte Klingen*.

⁷ *Solomon and Saturn*, lines 45–6; *Beowulf*, lines 38–40.

⁸ Lund, 'At the Water's Edge', pp. 52ff.

⁹ Nos. 32–4; Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts*, p. 160.

¹⁰ Pers. comm. John Hines, University of Cardiff.

Swords and Their Wielders

In art, archaeology and poetry, swords intertwine with their owner's personal identity. Sometimes the connection was passive in nature, simply conveying that identity to onlookers: not all individuals in pictorial, archaeological and literary sources possess a sword, meaning that association with this weapon instantly positioned that person in a more exclusive social group. Elsewhere the connection is more active, with swords being manipulated to *construct* this desirable identity. In all three sources, individuals 'receive' swords from a third party: an artist for an image; a mourner for a grave; a poet for a poem. Their acts consciously categorised individuals as sword owners, imbuing them with the prestige that attended that status regardless of whether they possessed it in real life.

Warriors

The relationship that most clearly traverses the boundary between art, archaeology and texts is that between swords and warriors. All three sources articulate an intimate link between the two, albeit requiring careful interrogation in light of the current querying of early medieval warrior identity. The debate, summarised in this book's Introduction, primarily concerns the reading of weapon burials as the resting places of 'warriors'. The correlation was dismantled when many graves were found to contain individuals considered too young, old, physically impaired or female to fit the modern definition of 'warrior' as an adult fighting man: if they were not 'warriors', these could not be 'warrior' graves. The argument, however, is somewhat of a red herring. There is no reason to believe that the modern understanding of 'warrior' was shared in the early medieval North. In fact, the same evidence used to sever the link between funerary weapons and 'warriors' can, if viewed from an alternative perspective, signal a different attitude towards warriorhood. The diversity of individuals buried with swords implies that 'warrior' was a social status, identity, and perhaps even an ideology, rather than a mere social function. As such, a person could become a 'warrior' regardless of their physical characteristics or participation in fighting simply via the ownership and/or display of weaponry on their person or in their grave; and that status did not expire if the person lived beyond fighting age.¹¹ Such a reading frees us from old interpretative constraints and aligns more comfortably with the fluidity apprehended from early medieval expressions of identity.

¹¹ C. J. Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London, 1997), p. 178; Jakobsson, *Krigarideologi*, pp. 18–21, 79–104 and 179–80; Harrison, "'Warrior Graves'?".

The three sources used in this study agree that swords played a key role in the nuances of warrior identity. Received wisdom holds that swords were restricted to the upper echelons of society, but this book has shown that more complex implications attended sword ownership. Several images and poetic episodes convey the sense that those who wielded swords were braver, worthier or more heroic than those who did not: for instance, the front-ranking position of swordsmen on the Bayeux Tapestry and Gotlandic picture-stones, and the contrast drawn between Wiglaf and his cowardly comrades in *Beowulf*. Archaeological evidence is less explicit. The fact that not all weapon burials contained swords implies a perceived difference between sword owners and the rest, but the nature of the difference is elusive. It may not have been a matter of simple social standing, however. As discussed above, swords embodied a dense network of past relationships that elevated their owners' status, but they also epitomised a type of close combat that differed from the sort of fighting experienced with other weapons (see below, pp. 154–6). In Ancient Greece, warriors who fought in the front ranks, known as *promachoi* ('foremost fighters'), were celebrated,¹² and the imagery of swordsmen upfront in early medieval art implies that sword ownership conferred similar prestige in this later period. Certainly, the selectivity with which swords are provisioned in imagery, archaeology and poetry suggests that swords bestowed a coveted mode of warrior status upon their owners.

The three sources also agree that early medieval warrior identity was more variegated than simply 'those with swords' and 'those without': there were even different grades of *sword* warrior. The type of sword that one possessed was significant, with ring-swords being especially key, as conveyed pictorially by the juxtaposition of ring- and non-ring-swords in the ranks, and archaeologically by the addition and removal of ring fittings to pommels, implying that this identity could be gained and lost. Poetic echoes inherent in the Old Norse word *hringr* are challenging to interpret and would benefit from future philological analysis; but the other sources seem to confirm that ring-swords were the preserve of specific warriors whose position eclipsed that of other sword-wielders. The prevailing image is that not all sword owners were created equal: many different types of sword existed, and the type – whether a ring-sword, an old sword, a sword with jewelled fittings or a plain organic hilt – determined one's 'grade'. The interchangeability of sword fittings may have made these weapons particularly suitable vehicles for the expression and construction of more complex warrior identities.

¹² John Lazenby, 'The Killing Zone', *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience*, ed. Victor Davis Hanson (London, 1991), pp. 87–109 at p. 93.

Women

Art, archaeology and poetry present a remarkably synchronous view of the relationship between women and swords. In both England and Scandinavia, women who are associated with swords often seem to have been irregular or even extraordinary: in art, the personified Virtues and Vices of the Anglo-Saxon Prudentius manuscripts or the mythic-seeming women on the Oseberg embroideries; in archaeology, the Anglo-Saxon woman with crossed feet at Buckland, Dover; and in poetry, the Biblical heroine Judith in England and the Valkyries in Scandinavian verse. In cases where swords *are* linked with regular women, a degree of separation is usually present: thus, women did wear swords but usually as miniature amulets; and they might be buried with swords but in an adapted form (as weaving beaters) or in a double burial beside a male with whom the sword is more physically aligned. A parallel occurs in Anglo-Saxon wills, in which women only ever bequeath swords jointly with their husbands. The singular exception in all of this is grave 581 at Birka, Sweden, which unlocks the potential for female sword ownership along the same lines as men – although it still carries exceptionalities that, ultimately, converge with the overall pattern of difference presented by the sources. It is quite possible that any number of other, more average, sword burials contained women whose identities are concealed by our inability to find them. The problems involved in sexing skeletons can make it feel impossible to make assertions about the sex or gender of early medieval sword burials, but we can only work with existing data and remain open-minded to future discoveries. In any case, these issues highlight once again the mutability of warrior identity in early medieval society and invite us to consider whether it was quite so gender binary as once assumed.

Perceptions of Swords over Time

Tracing perceptions of swords chronologically across the sources is hindered by their temporal incongruency: while archaeological and pictorial evidence is available for the entire early medieval period, poetry is absent until at least the eighth century. Nonetheless, one or two common themes emerge consistently over time in patterns that suggest ideas about swords both continued and altered over the centuries.

Old swords feature consistently in poetry and archaeology, appearing early on in graves and in poems based on early material, and later as river deposits and in verses like *The Battle of Maldon*. In images they are confined to the later period, materialising as tri-lobed pommels in eleventh-century art; but this need not reflect inter-source disagreement. The relevance of ancient swords may simply have been difficult to express in the stylised

art of the early period, and if the hints are there, modern viewers may lack the ability to intuit them.

The relationship between warriors, swords and violence is challenging to view chronologically due to the patchy coverage offered by the sources. An uptrend in violent sword imagery suggests that their connection perhaps intensified, but this cannot be tested against poetry since most verses derive from the later part of the period. Archaeology, which does delve further back in time, offers a murmur of agreement: the sword's shift from the left to the right side of the body in burials could evoke a rising concern to equip the dead with a ready sword in the face of escalating violence – albeit perhaps a Scandinavian trend, including where it appears in England. These cues offer a dim glimpse of changing attitudes in which swords were perceived primarily as weapons and less as attributes pertaining to status and identity. This notion of progressive 'weaponisation' gains traction in the broader context of later swords. Advances in sword manufacture improved their combat efficacy¹³ and facilitated their production in greater numbers, in turn reducing costs and increasing their accessibility to the degree that eleventh-century warriors would have found it far easier to acquire a sword than their sixth-century counterparts had done.¹⁴ Political changes may have played a role too, in that the exponential rise and consolidation of kingdoms, plus the ambitions (and countering) of travelling forces, fuelled the creation of larger, more sophisticated fighting forces in need of superior armament.¹⁵

The enhanced functionality of swords and their rising popularity as weapons may have influenced attitudes towards them. Perhaps they became more familiar in society, their incidence and utility conspiring to normalise what had once been a rarer, more exotic artefact. This viewpoint may be echoed in Anglo-Saxon art, which begins to depict swords more often in the hands of regular (if elite) folk rather than the Biblical or mythical characters of earlier imagery. Similarly, the fading of furnished burial may have resulted in swords being passed on more regularly, ending up in hands that may once not have received them, and causing their rota of exploits and partnerships to diffuse beyond meaning. A resultant loss of character for swords emerges further in the more generic appearance of later weapons. Where once they had been inspiring individuals viewed in comradely terms, swords were now more akin to practical, generic tools

¹³ Wilson, 'Some Neglected', pp. 48–9; Tylecote and Gilmour, *Metallography*, pp. 247 and 249; Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, pp. 50–1.

¹⁴ John Gillingham, 'Thegns and Knights in Eleventh-Century England: Who Was Then the Gentleman?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1995), pp. 129–53 at pp. 136–7; Williams, *World before Domesday*, p. 110.

¹⁵ Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2010), especially ch. 4.

in their wielders' service. The image is one of a mighty, mysterious wild creature being tamed and gentrified by a human being.

The problem is, when early medieval people talk about swords, this is not really what they say. Descriptions of characterful swords and the narrating of their histories in literature derive mostly from the second half of the period, warning against easy assumptions based on comfortable interpretative norms that correlate with modern preconceptions of social and scientific progress. The evidence instead invites us to seek other possibilities. While swords became more efficient, more practical, more available and more generic, they did not necessarily become less special, less personal, less characterful to their owners. The motor car provides a modern analogy. Over time, cars have undergone very similar changes: indeed, it is a truism that all cars, regardless of manufacturer, now look the same. Each one, however, is an individual in the eyes of its owner. It has its own smell, sounds and behaviour: the clunk of its indicators, the squeak of its windscreen wipers, a tricky lock or a sticky door; it hums with memories of journeys shared; it probably also has a name. The same may have been true of later swords. Each one would have had a particular feel in the hand, its weight and balance, being a little heavy or slow, or light or quick. Like a car, these individualities would have been experienced by the next owner, and the next, and on down the line, meaning that to some degree these items would always take on their own character regardless of how generic or commonplace they were among their peers.

Ultimately it seems probable that perceptions of swords as characterful, 'living' objects were consistent throughout the period, along with their adjacency to violence and the world of warriors. Changes in their function, appearance and availability did little to dilute these views; and their stability in the face of powerful social, technological, religious and political developments underlines the prominence these weapons enjoyed in early medieval minds.

Perceptions of Swords in Space

One aim of this book was to explore, with greater rigour, the historic scholarly conflation of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian evidence about swords. When viewed in parallel, the three sources demonstrate a mixed picture of shared and diverging attitudes, the complexity of which, in places, requires careful negotiation.

The notion of swords as 'living' objects is shared between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian evidence. Its primary expression emerges, again, through the presence of old swords. Worn, repaired and modified swords are encountered widely in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian archaeology, demonstrating that wielders in both regions curated and passed on their weapons over considerable lengths of time. Scandinavian art and poetry

are more equivocal on the matter. While ancient swords appear clearly in Anglo-Saxon imagery, their presence is less obvious in Scandinavian art, occurring perhaps on a gold foil from Sorte Muld in Denmark and on the Skokloster runestone in Sweden. Similarly, the prestige surrounding old swords that resounds throughout Anglo-Saxon verse is only hinted at in Scandinavian skaldic poetry – although this may, tentatively, be boosted by its prominence in later Icelandic saga. These differences could reflect a minor cultural variance in the import attached to ancient swords; but the nature of the sources may also have shaped the picture. Old English poetry, being more narrative in character, provided greater scope for poets to ruminate on a sword's history and to weave this into the unfurling plot; conversely skaldic verse, being more episodic and limited metrically, afforded little room for this sort of thing. Similarly, Anglo-Saxon artists enjoyed a greater diversity of artistic media. Manuscript illumination, absent from Scandinavia throughout the Early Middle Ages, was a flexible freehand mode of expression that enabled artists to create complex shapes and details, including such accurate depictions of swords that archaic types of hilt can be recognised. Such fine details were harder to achieve in the more plastic media of metalwork, stone sculpture, carving and embroidery practised by Scandinavian craftspeople. As such, ancient swords may have a lower profile in Scandinavian art and poetry because the features which identify them were difficult to convey in the available media. While their significance may only be glimpsed in these sources, it is confirmed archaeologically: indeed, the most spectacular examples of worn and modified swords observed in this study both derive from Scandinavia, respectively from grave 942 at Birka, Uppland and from Vallstenarum on Gotland.

Another cross-cultural aspect of the 'living' sword concept is the notion of 'person-like' swords with visual identities, characters and social networks. Archaeology again supplies the strongest evidence. Modified swords, found in both regions, reflect behaviour that created unique visual identities for these weapons, akin to a human face. Pommels from both areas also display asymmetrical decoration and wear patterns, hinting that they had 'public' faces that were habitually shown. Poetry is more ambiguous. While Old English poems teem with swords that have names, personalities, partnerships and quotable histories, skaldic verse contains only glimpses of similar ideas (although they do feature strongly in later sagas). As mentioned above, skaldic verse offered fewer opportunities than Old English poems for this type of elaboration, meaning that vivid portraits of person-like swords are less likely to appear in it. Such perceptions may therefore have been shared more equally between England and Scandinavia than can be traced precisely across the different sources.

A genuine cultural divergence concerns the thought that these weapons could behave autonomously as animated beings. This time archaeology is quiet, but art and poetry concur that the phenomenon, if it existed at

all, was more aligned with Scandinavian attitudes. Only Scandinavian or Scandinavian-influenced images depict lone swords in violent action, while skaldic depiction of swords with voices, and the likening of swords to living beings and natural phenomena, is essentially unmatched in Old English verse *except* in poems which show signs of Scandinavian influence. The point of departure appears to be that while Anglo-Saxon swords could be 'living' or 'person-like', only Scandinavian swords could truly come to life.

The difference may have been influenced by traditional Germanic beliefs. Scholars of early medieval Scandinavia have argued persuasively that the line between human and non-human beings was mutable, at times even non-existent; related notions of cross-being hybridity and shape-shifting have also been identified, usually involving animals¹⁶ but perhaps also extending to special artefacts, like swords. If so, the fusion between wielder and sword may have given the latter the means to 'act', in which case it did not spring to 'life' independently but rather via its connection with a wielder. The perception may have been, therefore, that these weapons were not autonomous from their wielders but an abbreviation of them – recalling ideas explored across the sources. The link between these ideas and traditional beliefs may clarify their Scandinavian flavour. Scandinavia's late conversion perhaps helped to preserve such concepts longer than in England, where an early conversion may have signalled their decline. Anglo-Saxon texts convey discomfort with the wilder concepts of the old ways, including the elevation of non-human entities in the natural and animal worlds:¹⁷ perhaps similar views of powerful artefacts were equally unpalatable and were eventually neutralised, while safer notions of 'living', rather than 'alive', swords endured.

The sources agree that swords and warriors were closely entwined in England and Scandinavia. They are frequent companions in poetry and art and many of those placed in graves had probably been owned by a warrior. However, this pairing appears to have been more marked in Scandinavia. Around two-thirds of individuals carrying swords in Scandinavian art may represent warriors, compared with around half in Anglo-Saxon (Graph 3) – although identification may be a problem. Skaldic poetry characterises swords as the weapon of regular warriors whereas Anglo-Saxon verse associates them more closely with elite individuals. Interestingly, experts have remarked that a greater number of

¹⁶ Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400–1000* (London, 2011), ch. 4, especially pp. 81ff; Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*; Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 101ff.

¹⁷ Aleks Pluskowski, 'The Archaeology of Paganism', *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. Helena Hamerow, David A. Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford, 2011), pp. 764–78; David Petts, *Pagan and Christian: Religious Change in Early Medieval Europe* (Bristol, 2011).

swords survive from Scandinavia than from England; accordingly, they may have been more accessible to a greater range of people, whereas in England, until the later period at least, primarily higher-status folk (or those in their service) were able to acquire one. The meanings of swords, and the ways in which they were perceived, may have varied culturally as a consequence: in Scandinavia, swords often communicated 'warrior' and in England they communicated 'elite'.

Wider sword ownership among Scandinavians could have resulted in the weapon becoming a cultural marker, differentiating Scandinavians (who possessed many swords) from Anglo-Saxons (who possessed fewer). This may help to explain why the poet of the Old English *Exodus* used swords to distinguish Egyptians (ciphers for Scandinavians) from Israelites (ciphers for Anglo-Saxons), and why sword motifs materialised on the coins of Viking York along with other Scandinavian symbols like Thor's hammer and Odin's raven.¹⁸ It may also clarify why swords were not used as royal attributes in Anglo-Saxon art before the eleventh-century portrait of Cnut in the New Minster *Liber Vitae*. The sword's deployment in this image can be read in two (not mutually exclusive) ways. First, it deliberately tapped into an Anglo-Saxon perception of swords as elite attributes, inspired perhaps by Cnut's desire to present himself as an elite Anglo-Saxon to his Anglo-Saxon subjects.¹⁹ Second, it was mobilised as a Scandinavian cultural symbol, uniting pictorially Cnut's Scandinavian (sword-wielder) and Anglo-Saxon (church patron) aspects to justify his position as king of all England's inhabitants, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon alike. This second point may help to explain why swords became royal attributes in later Anglo-Saxon art: to the Anglo-Saxons, Cnut was a ruler with unparalleled power, presiding over an empire encompassing England, Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden. His Anglo-Saxon successors perhaps adopted his iconography, incorporating the Scandinavian-style sword, in an effort to mimic his authority.

The Source(s) of 'Life'?

Within the intricate tapestry of perceptions mentioned at the start of this chapter, one thread shines brightest, like gold among dark wool: the notion of the 'living' sword. This glittering strand weaves through every part of our discussion, from the relevance of ancient swords to the

¹⁸ Alternatively, the bird could represent St John's eagle: Gareth Williams, 'Kingship, Christianity and Coinage: Monetary and Political Perspectives on Silver Economy in the Viking Age', *Silver Economy and the Viking Age*, ed. James Graham-Campbell and Gareth Williams (Walnut Creek, CA, 2007), pp. 177–214 at p. 198.

¹⁹ Cf. Karkov, *Ruler Portraits*, pp. 125 and 131ff; Timothy Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great: Conquest and the Consolidation of Power in Northern Europe in the Early Eleventh Century* (Leiden, 2009), p. 97.

framing of warrior identities. It survived the ruptures of the period, particularly conversion to Christianity which sparked such lasting changes in many realms of Anglo-Saxon thought, behaviour and expression. It transcended cultural boundaries, suggesting that it was part of a broader set of attitudes that were shared across northern Europe. Comparison with spears demonstrates repeatedly that this notion was reserved for swords; no other war-gear was viewed and interpreted in quite the same way as characterful, even person-like, beings. What inspired these perceptions? What was the source of this 'life'? Two aspects peculiar to the social experience of swords stand out as motivators: their physicality and their mode of killing.

Physicality

In physical terms, swords could circulate for generations. Spear- and axe-shafts might break and their war-heads be lost in combat; shield-boards might splinter and be discarded; but swords were durable. Archaeology demonstrates that broken blades were ground back into shape or even riveted back together, while damaged or unwanted fittings could be switched out for others. The sword's restorability enabled the same weapon to last an aeon, accruing a dense biography and social network much like a human being over the course of their life.²⁰ Its intricate history triggered powerful memories in those who owned or encountered the weapon, fostering the sense that it had lived a genuine life whose years, scars and battles, both literal and figurative, were visible on its body.²¹

Moreover, the composite nature of swords offered their owners endless opportunities for customisation. Wielders could add to or amend their weapon's fittings to create a unique identity that was not only recognisable on sight but evolved (and aged) over the years, like a human face. The ability to modify a sword's physiognomy in step with one's own life experiences, for instance by adding a ring or fresh fitting, may have amplified the weapon's 'person-like' aspect, transforming it into a material embodiment of its owner. Other early medieval weapons were not customisable in this way. Spears and axes, comprising iron heads and wooden shafts, proffered few opportunities for tailoring. Shafts were sometimes painted and carved,²² and while some spear- and axe-heads were inlaid with designs, such weapons form a minority. Such personalisation could not, in any case, be altered as readily as detachable sword fittings: the initial design was far more 'locked in'.

Also key to a sword's physicality was the comfort with which it could be worn on the body, over long periods of time. A good harness would

²⁰ Gosden and Marshall, 'Cultural Biography', p. 170.

²¹ Williams, *Death and Memory*, pp. 40ff.

²² Stephenson, *Late Saxon Army*, p. 107; Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons*, p. 44.

bear a sword's weight well, leaving the wearer free to carry it around hands-free until, eventually, it may have been viewed quite literally as an 'extension of self'. Conversely, spears and axes had to be carried in the hand and while mail-armour, helmets and (possibly) shields²³ could be worn on the body, they would have been less comfortable to wear over hours, reducing the probability that they ever became comparable 'addenda' to their owners' physiques. This aspect of swords may have contributed to the notion of them being 'living' beings: they lasted long enough to build a 'life' and had the ability to reflect, even to merge with, their human wielders.

Mode of Killing

Since the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists and psychologists have researched the human experience of violence.²⁴ Their studies of modern combatants articulate the severe physiological and emotional responses triggered by warfare, such as fluctuating emotions, physical and mental exhaustion, shock, irrational thought, and vision and hearing problems.²⁵ Early medieval warriors are likely to have endured similar sensations, despite facing action more regularly than their modern counterparts.²⁶ Research has shown that violence becomes harder to bear the closer one gets to the enemy. Facing deadly aggression from, or dealing it to, a fellow individual is deemed to be the most horrifying aspect of combat, and the most damaging to warriors' psychological state.²⁷ Indeed, Keegan's influential study *The Face of Battle* argued that the lack of fatal bayonet wounds at Waterloo (1815) and the Somme (1916) proved that combatants found it nearly impossible to sink their blades into another living, breathing, bleeding human being.²⁸

This requirement was unavoidable in early medieval conflicts, comprising hand-to-hand fights in which warriors would, as a matter of course, lock eyes with their opponents and hear their voices. The small and

²³ Via carrying-straps, although evidence is sparse: Dickinson and Härke, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Shields', p. 60; Stephenson, *Anglo-Saxon Shield*, pp. 52–4.

²⁴ John Carman, 'Introduction: Approaches to Violence', *Material Harm: Archaeological Studies of War and Violence*, ed. John Carman (Glasgow, 1997), pp. 1–23 at p. 12.

²⁵ Dave Grossman and Bruce K. Siddle, 'Psychological Effects of Combat', *Stress of War, Conflict and Disaster*, ed. George Fink (San Diego, CA, 2010), pp. 440–9 at pp. 443–6; also John Carman, ed., *Material Harm: Archaeological Studies of War and Violence* (Glasgow, 1997); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, 1976), p. 327.

²⁶ Keegan, *Face of Battle*, p. 116.

²⁷ Grossman and Siddle, 'Psychological Effects', pp. 444–6; Dave Grossman, 'Evolution of Weaponry', *Stress of War, Conflict and Disaster*, ed. George Fink (San Diego, CA, 2010), pp. 186–99, fig. 1 and p. 190.

²⁸ Grossman, 'Evolution of Weaponry', p. 190; Keegan, *Face of Battle*, pp. 320–1.

localised scale of earlier warfare increased the likelihood that combatants even knew each other. On the early medieval battlefield, the closest-range combat was provided by swords. With axes and spears, killing took place at a range of approximately half a metre to two-and-a-half metres from the warrior's hand, depending on the length of the weapon's shaft – more if the weapon was thrown, as types of both could be.²⁹ Swords, which were used for slashing and chopping rather than thrusting,³⁰ maimed a foe mere centimetres from the wielder's hand and caused a spray of blood that would soak the face and body. As such, sword combat would have been the most intense, and disturbing, mode of killing available to the early medieval warrior. Herein may lie a reason why those who wielded swords in the early medieval North commanded more authority and respect than those who did not.

The appalling enterprise of close combat may also have formed the anvil upon which the unique bond between sword and wielder was welded. Anthropologists have shown that stressful ordeals cause humans to turn towards possessions or artefacts that carry special relevance to them.³¹ Swords fit squarely into that category, as precious heirlooms embodying cherished memories or relationships, and familiar 'faces' that offered comfort like a comrade might when trapped in the teeth of the fight. This furrow can be ploughed more deeply. Soldiers interviewed in studies of combat experience regularly remark that only those who have faced battle can truly understand it, and each other.³² The connection between warriors and their 'person-like' swords may indeed have been similar to comradeship, involving the type of reliance and mutual understanding that exists between two human warriors. This intersects with, and heightens the poignancy of, multiple themes and episodes within this book: the inextricability of swords and warriors in image and verse; the habitual touching of sword fittings; the cradling of swords in burials; Beowulf's 'dear iron'; Óláfr Tryggvason commissioning a poem with swords mentioned in every line; and the appeal of a rune scratched onto a pommel to stand firm in the maelstrom. A modern counterpart to this attitude is the 'Rifleman's Creed', learned by every US Marine Corps recruit and encapsulated in this extract:

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I master my life ... My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I

²⁹ Stephenson, *Late Saxon Army*, p. 106; Ian P. Stephenson, *Viking Warfare* (Stroud, 2012), pp. 59ff.

³⁰ Cameron, *Sheaths and Scabbards*, p. 76; Tylecote and Gilmour, *Metallography*, pp. 247 and 249.

³¹ Hallam and Hockey, *Death*, p. 42.

³² Grossman and Siddle, 'Psychological Effects', p. 444.

The Sword in Early Medieval Northern Europe

will learn its weaknesses, its strengths, its parts, its accessories ... We will become part of each other.³³

The two-edged long sword became a 'living' being to those who knew it for two reasons. First, it 'lived' a physical life, much like a human did. And second, it offered – and endured – an experience of such singular intensity that its sharing fused the wielder and weapon together, like the intricate core of a pattern-welded sword.

³³ Alexander Rose, *American Rifle: A Biography* (New York, 2008), pp. 316–17.

Postscript

In early medieval northern Europe, swords were not everyday artefacts. Not all families had one in their home, like a knife or a pottery vessel. Many probably never even saw one in real life. Swords were owned, experienced and encountered by a limited number of people, who themselves were members of limited social groups and participated in limited social activities. This exclusivity has helped to fuel the enduring scholarly view that the sword's primary symbolic meaning was as an emblem of elite status; but such a reading overlooks an issue that has emerged as a thematic touchstone in this book: while the physical ownership of swords was restricted, recognition of their purpose and significance was not. Tales of great swords, made by gods and wielded by heroes, were recited in communities throughout the early medieval North, from humble dwellings to soaring timber halls. The muted relics of these stories echo in the 'Dancing Warriors' on the Sutton Hoo helmet, the words of *Beowulf* and perhaps in ancient swords buried in furnished graves. One did not have to own a sword to understand something of its relevance and meaning in society: indeed, most inhabitants of modern northern Europe are not sword owners, but they know what Excalibur is. By exploring the thoughts of those whose views were shaped not only by ownership of swords, but also by stories and images of swords, this book has unveiled a more complex picture of these weapons' place in the society and world-view of early medieval northern Europe.

One sign of this complexity is that while swords were relevant to various social groups – warrior and civilian, secular and ecclesiastical, male and female, and all shades of grey in between – their relevance was not homogeneous. Multiple conceptualisations of swords existed, reflected in the varying attention given to specific sword parts in imagery, poetry and funerary rituals; and for women, swords were attributes in exceptional circumstances only, their symbolism emphasising the weapon's protective rather than aggressive qualities. The sword's deepest significance, and most intense relationship, involved warriors, defined here as a social status rather than a function. Swords were a cornerstone of early medieval warrior identity, expressing and constructing it both in art and in life; and elevating sword-wielders above other warriors to the pinnacle of a perceived hierarchy of fighters. Even among warriors, however, the meaning of swords was not homogeneous: different types of swords defined different grades of sword-wielders, who were themselves ranked within a sub-hierarchy of armed forces.

Swords were not only symbols in this world: they were dynamic participants, like the human beings who made, owned and admired them. A crowning theme of this book is that swords were like 'living' beings with familiar 'faces' and personal life-histories – the longer the better, with ancient swords possessing a singular prestige that echoes the universal maxim 'respect your elders'. The notion of 'living' swords, like their close partnership with warriors, endured for centuries and perhaps intensified over time. It was also shared, in large part, between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians, with minor cultural differences concerning the sword's position as an elite or warrior weapon, and its perceived ability to truly 'come to life'.

It is here that a new, fuller understanding of the sword's role in early medieval society materialises. These weapons were precious not only because they were costly, but because they were beloved companions, familiar faces and the means by which groups of people made all sorts of connections. They were also trusted comrades, 'friends in war' with whom the blood, sweat and tears of battle could be shared and made sense of. Indeed, the realm for which swords were innovated – warfare – provides the key to unlocking their fullest significance.¹ Swords were extraordinary among all other weapons used regularly by early medieval warriors. Spears and arrows doubled as hunting weapons;² axes were related conceptually to tools; but swords were unequivocally, unapologetically, weapons of war, designed for the purpose of killing other human beings. This aspect has not received enough attention, neither in early discussions of typology, nor in newer theoretically-charged works exploring identity and biography. This book has shown that the sword's particular brand of bloodshed was a fulcrum upon which its social significance turned. Such a finding correlates with research into the anthropology of violence, which argues that the link between aggression and the seizing of power infused artefacts involved in those pursuits with great magnitude – irrespective of their material worth.³ This is why it is vital to approach swords through the eyes and minds of those who understood them far better than we do. In so doing, we finally arrive at a denser, more colourful image of these weapons and why they held such a privileged place in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian thought during the early medieval period.

¹ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, 'The Birka Warrior: The Material Culture of a Martial Society', unpublished PhD thesis, Stockholm University (2006); Carman, 'Introduction', p. 19.

² Helle Vankilde, 'Warfare, Weaponry, and Material Culture: An Introduction', *Warfare and Society: Archaeological and Social Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Ton Otto, Henrik Thrane and Helle Vankilde (Aarhus, 2006), pp. 483–90 at pp. 484–5.

³ John Abbink, 'Preface: Violation and Violence as Cultural Phenomena', *Meanings of Violence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Göran Aijmer and John Abbink (Oxford and New York, 2000), pp. xi–xvii; Göran Aijmer, 'Introduction: The Idiom of Violence in Imagery and Discourse', *ibid.*, pp. 1–21 at p. 1.

Appendix

Images and Swords Referenced in the Text

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
Images				
1.	Bayeux Tapestry	Late C11	Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux, Bayeux, Normandy, France	Lewis et al., <i>The Bayeux Tapestry</i> ; Musset, <i>Bayeux Tapestry</i>
2.	Embroidery fragments, ?England	C9th	Museo di S. Ambrogio, Milan, Italy	Crowfoot, 'Notes'; Budny and Tweddle, 'Maaseik Embroideries'
3.	Embroidery fragments, Oseberg ship burial, Vestfold, Norway	C9th	Vikingskipshuset, Oslo, Norway	Christensen and Nockert, <i>Osebergfunnet</i>
4.	Embroidery fragments, Överhogdal, Härjedalen, Sweden	C9th	Universitetet i Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, Norway	Franzén and Nockert, <i>Bonaderna från Skog</i>
5.	Shield ornament, Edix Hill (Barrington A), Cambridgeshire	C7th?	Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge	Malim and Hines, <i>Anglo-Saxon Cemetery</i> , pp. 93 and 221, fig. 329
6.	Helmet, grave XIV, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden	C6th	Historiska Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, 9785:XIV	Stolpe and Arne, <i>La Nécropole</i> , pp. 53–5, pl. XLI, figs 3–4, pl. XLII, fig. 1
7.	The Franks Casket	Early C8th	British Museum, London, 1867,0120.1 and Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy	Beckwith, <i>Ivory Carvings</i> , no. 1; Webster, <i>Franks Casket</i>
8.	Ælfric, Old English Hexateuch etc.	First half C11th	British Library, London, MS Cotton Claudius B.IV	Dodwell and Clemoes, <i>Old English Illustrated Hexateuch</i> ; Withers, <i>Old English Hexateuch</i>

9. Helmet, grave 7, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden First half C7th Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden Arwidsson, *Valsgärde 7*, pp. 21–33, Abb. 133 and 138
10. Picture-stone, 'Stora Hammars I', Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden C8th Bungeuseet, Gotland / Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 29974:1 Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine I*, pp. 86–7, figs 81–2; Nylén and Lamm, *Stones*, no. 184
11. Runestone, Ramsund, Jäder, Södermanland, Sweden Early C11th *In situ* Fuglesang, *Some Aspects*, no. 80, pl. 46A
12. Runestone, Sparlösa, Västergötland, Sweden C8th–early C9th Sparlösa Church, Sparlösa, Västergötland, Sweden Jansson, *Runes*, p. 15, pl. 5
13. Runestone, Söderby, Uppland, Sweden C10th–C11th *In situ* Jansson, *Runes*, p. 15, pl. 5
14. Harley Psalter C11th (additions C12th) British Library, London, MS Harley 603 Noel, *Harley Psalter*; Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, no. 2
15. Anglo-Saxon Miscellany First half C11th British Library, London, MS Cotton Tiberius B.V, fols 2–73, 77–88: Calendar, Cicero Aratea, Marvels of the East McGurk et al., *Eleventh Century Anglo-Saxon Miscellany*; Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, no. 192
16. Eadui or Arundel Psalter First half C11th British Library, London, MS Arundel 155, fols 1–135, 171–91 Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, no. 171; Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, no. 66
17. Helmet, Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk Early C7th British Museum, London, 1939,1010.93 Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, pp. 138–231, figs 140–5; Marzinzik, *Sutton Hoo Helmet*

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
Images (<i>continued</i>)				
18.	Helmet, grave 8, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden	Second half C6th	Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden	Arwidsson, <i>Valsgärde</i> 8, pp. 22–4, 101 and 128–9, Abb. 78–9
19.	Four helmet <i>Presblech</i> dies, Björnhovda, Torslunda, Öland, Sweden	C7th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 4325:a–d	Bruce-Mitford, <i>Sutton Hoo</i> , pp. 214ff
20.	Gold foil (<i>guldgubbe</i>), Sorte Muld, Bornholm, Denmark	C6th–C9th	Bornholms Museum, Denmark	Watt, 'Kings or Gods?', fig. 3b
21.	Miniature copper-alloy sword, Eketorp, Öland, Sweden	C6th–C7th	Unverified	Näsman, 'Vapenminiaturer', fig. 3
22.	Miniature copper-alloy sword, Bejsebakken, Denmark	C9th–C10th	Private collection	Koktvedgaard Zeiten, 'Amulets', no. 38, fig. 19
23.	Miniature copper-alloy sword, Kalmergården, Denmark	C9th	Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark, C 32167	Koktvedgaard Zeiten, 'Amulets', no. 37
24.	Spear graffito on Carolingian silver strap-end, grave 750, Birka, Uppland, Sweden	C9th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.750	Arbman, <i>Birka: Die Gräber</i> 1, p. 270, Abb. 219
25.	Runestone, Skokloster, Uppland, Sweden	Mid C11th	<i>In situ</i>	Anker, <i>Art of Scandinavia</i> , p. 188

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| 26. | Silver figurine, grave 825, Birka, Uppland, Sweden | C10th | Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, Bj. 825 | Arbman, <i>Birka: Die Gräber 1</i> , pp. 298–300; Roesdahl and Wilson, <i>From Viking to Crusader</i> , no. 186 |
| 27. | Silver figurine, grave 825, Birka, Uppland, Sweden | C10th | Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, Bj. 825 | Arbman, <i>Birka: Die Gräber 1</i> , p. 299 |
| 28. | Cross-shaft fragment, All Saints Church, Brailsford, Derbyshire | Mid C11th | <i>In situ</i> | Kendrick, <i>Late Saxon</i> , pp. 70–1, pls XLVI.2, XLVII.2 |
| 29. | New Minster Register (<i>Liber Vitae</i>) | First half C11th | British Library, London, MS Stowe 944 | Ohlgren, <i>Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination</i> , no. 183; Temple, <i>Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts</i> , no. 78 |
| 30. | Bury Psalter | First half C11th | Biblioteca Apostolica, Vatican City, Rome, Italy, Vaticana MS Reg. Lat. 12 | Ohlgren, <i>Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination</i> , no. 3; Harris, 'Marginal Drawings' |
| 31. | Cædmon or Junius Manuscript | Early C11th | Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Junius 11 (S.C. 5123) | Ohlgren, <i>Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination</i> , no. 16; Temple, <i>Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts</i> , no. 58 |
| 32. | Part of cross-head and shaft, 'Middleton 2', North Riding, Yorkshire | C10th | St Andrew's Church, Middleton, North Riding, Yorkshire | Lang, <i>Corpus Volume III</i> , pp. 182–4, ills 676–81 |
| 33. | Part of cross-head and shaft, 'Middleton 4', North Riding, Yorkshire | C10th | St Andrew's Church, Middleton, North Riding, Yorkshire | Lang, <i>Corpus Volume III</i> , p. 185, ills 686–7 |
| 34. | Part of cross-shaft, 'Middleton 5', North Riding, Yorkshire | C10th | St Andrew's Church, Middleton, North Riding, Yorkshire | Lang, <i>Corpus Volume III</i> , pp. 185–6, ills 688–9 |

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
<i>Images (continued)</i>				
35.	Part of cross-shaft, 'Kirklevington 2', North Yorkshire	First half C10th	Nave, St Martin's Church, Kirklevington, North Yorkshire	Lang, <i>Corpus Volume VI</i> , pp. 142-3, ills 404-7
36.	Part of cross-shaft, 'Sockburn 7', County Durham	Third quarter C10th	Convers Chapel, All Saints' Church, Sockburn, County Durham	Cramp, <i>Corpus Volume I</i> , p. 138, pl. 134:726
37.	Runestone, Ledberg Churchyard, Östergötland, Sweden	C11th	In situ	Moltke, <i>Runes</i> , pp. 245-8
38.	Stone slab, St Nicholas Parish Church, Ipswich, Suffolk	C11th	North Aisle, St Nicholas Parish Church, Ipswich, Suffolk	Okasha, <i>Hand-list</i> , no. 58
39.	Runestone, 'Lund 1', Allhelgonakyrkan, Lund, Skåne, Sweden	C11th	University of Lund library, Skåne, Sweden	Moltke, <i>Runes</i> , pp. 255 and 259, no. 3
40.	Tiberius Psalter	Mid C11th	British Library, London, MS Cotton Tiberius C.VI	Ohlgren, <i>Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination</i> , no. 203; Wormald, 'English Eleventh-Century Psalter'
41.	Prudentius, <i>Psychomachia</i> , etc.	Late C10th	Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 23, pt 1	Ohlgren, <i>Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination</i> , no. 153; Stettiner, <i>Die illustrierten</i>
42.	Prudentius, <i>Psychomachia</i>	C10th-C11th	British Library, London, MS Cotton Cleopatra C.VIII	Ohlgren, <i>Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination</i> , no. 15; Stettiner, <i>Die illustrierten</i>

43. Prudentius, *Psychomachia*
Late C10th (C11th additions)
British Library, London, MS Additional 24199, fols 2–38
Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, no. 156; Stettiner, *Die illustrierten*
44. Helmet *Pressblech* fragment, Caenby, Lincolnshire
C6th–C7th
British Museum, London
Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo*, p. 206, fig. 153; Helmbrecht, 'Figures', no. 2, fig. 1f
45. Helmet *Pressblech* fragment, East Mound, Gamla Uppsala, Uppland, Sweden
C6th–C7th
Gamla Uppsala Museum, Uppsala, Sweden
Arrhenius and Freij, "'Pressbleck'" Fragments'; Lindqvist, 'Vendel-Time'
46. Picture-stone, 'Ardre VIII', Ardre Church, Gotland, Sweden
C8th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 11118:VIII
Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine I*, figs 139–40 and 22c; Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine II*, pp. 22–4, fig. 311; Nylén and Lamm, *Stones*, no. 16
47. Benedictinal of St Æthelwold
Second half C10th
British Library, London, MS Additional 49598
Deshman, *Benedictional*; Ohlgren, *Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination*, no. 111
48. Picture-stone, 'Änge I', Buttle, Gotland, Sweden
C9th–C10th
In situ
Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine II*, pp. 36–9, figs 333–4; Nylén and Lamm, *Stones*, no. 43
49. Picture-stone, 'Broa XVI', Halla, Gotland, Sweden
Mid C8th–C9th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 16239
Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine II*, pp. 65–6, figs 394–6; Nylén and Lamm, *Stones*, no. 116
50. Stone grave-marker, Lindisfarne 37', Lindisfarne, Northumberland
Late C9th
Priory Museum, Lindisfarne, Northumberland
Cramp, *Corpus Volume I*, pp. 206–7, pls 201:1132–4; Webster and Backhouse, *Making of England*, no. 117

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
<i>Images (continued)</i>				
51.	Part of grave-marker, 'Kirby Hill 9', All Saints' Church, Kirkby-on-the-Moor, North Yorkshire	Late C9th–mid C10th	Lost since 1974	Lang, <i>Corpus Volume VI</i> , p. 133, ills 358–9, fig. 15
52.	Sandstone slab, Tanberg, Buskerud, Norway	C11th	Universitetet i Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, Norway, C.17877	Fuglesang, <i>Some Aspects</i> , no. 61, pl. 38
53.	Runestone, Gök, Näsbyholm, Södermanland, Sweden	C10th–C11th	In situ	Fuglesang, <i>Some Aspects</i> , no. 81, pl. 46B
54.	Runestone, Drävle, Altuna, Uppland, Sweden	First half C11th	Göksbo, Enköping, Sweden	Fuglesang, <i>Some Aspects</i> , no. 70, pl. 43B
55.	Silver penny, 'Sword St Peter' type, York	c. 925–50	Various, including British Museum, London, 1935,1117.369	Backhouse et al., <i>Golden Age</i> , no. 245; Graham-Campbell, <i>Viking Artefacts</i> , nos. 365–7
56.	Silver penny, 'St Martin of Lincoln' type	c. 915	British Museum, London, CM 698	Graham-Campbell, <i>Viking Artefacts</i> , no. 368
57.	Spear graffito on Islamic coin, Östjädra, Dingtuna, Västmanland, Sweden	First half C10th	Kungliga Myntkabinett, Stockholm, Sweden	Hammarberg and Rispling, 'Graffiter', fyndnummer 28, ill. 104
58.	Runestone, Ryda churchyard, Västergötland, Sweden	C10th–C11th	In situ	Projektet Samnordisk runtextdatabas Vg. 124, http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm

59.	Grave-marker or part of cross-head, 'Weston 1', Weston, West Yorkshire	C10th	Yorkshire Museum, York	Coatsworth, <i>Corpus Volume VIII</i> , pp. 268–9, ills 777–83
60.	Cross-shaft, 'Norbury Cross 1', Norbury, Derbyshire	Mid C10th	St Mary's Church, Norbury, Derbyshire	Routh, 'Corpus'
61.	Copper-alloy 'Valkyrie' figurine, Wickham Market, Suffolk	Mid C9th–C10th	Norwich Castle Museum, Norwich	Portable Antiquities Scheme Database SF9305
62.	Copper-alloy 'Valkyrie' figurine or brooch, Cawthorpe, Lincolnshire	C9th–C11th	Private collection?	Portable Antiquities Scheme Database LEIC-C58A13 (findspot given as 'Exton', Rutland); Gardela, "'Warrior-Women'", p. 304; Jensen, <i>Viking Age Amulets</i> , no. 243; Hall, <i>Exploring the World</i> , p. 107
63.	Copper-alloy horseman and 'Valkyrie' brooch, Lake Tissø, Kalundborg, Zealand, Denmark	Mid C9th–C10th	Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark	Gardela, "'Warrior-Women'", p. 302, fig. 5.1
64.	Copper-alloy horseman and 'Valkyrie' brooch, Lake Tissø, Kalundborg, Zealand, Denmark	Mid C9th–C10th	Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark	Gardela, "'Warrior-Women'", p. 302, fig. 5.2
65.	Copper-alloy miniature figure, Lake Tissø, Kalundborg, Zealand, Denmark	C8th–C11th	Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark	Gardela, "'Warrior-Women'", p. 304

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
<i>Images (continued)</i>				
66.	Copper-alloy horseman and 'Valkyrie' brooch, Stetinget, Denmark	Mid C9th–C10th	Unverified	Gardela, "Warrior-Women", p. 302, fig. 5.3
67.	Copper-alloy 'Valkyrie' brooch, Vrejlev, Denmark	Mid C9th–C10th	Unverified	Gardela, "Warrior-Women", p. 302, fig. 5.5
68.	Copper-alloy 'Valkyrie' brooch, Gammel Hviding, Jylland, Denmark	C9th–C11th	Unverified	Unpublished. Image available at http://scienceblogs.com/aardvarchaeology/2013/01/07/valkyrie-figurine-from-harby (accessed 13 February 2017)
69.	Gilded silver 'Valkyrie' figurine, Hårby, Funen, Denmark		Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark	Gardela, "Warrior-Women", p. 304
70.	Silver 'Valkyrie' brooch, Tårs, Hjørring, Denmark	C8th–C11th	Private collection?	Jensen, <i>Viking Age Amulets</i> , site index no. 91
71.	Wooden cart, Oseberg ship burial, Vestfold, Norway	First half C9th	Vikingskipshuset, Oslo, Norway	Roesdahl and Wilson, <i>From Viking to Crusader</i> , p. 207, fig. 4; Sjøvold, <i>Oseberg-Find</i>
72.	Sword, Sarre grave 250, Kent	C6th–C7th	Maidstone Museum, Kent	Evison, <i>Dover</i> , pp. 25–6
73.	Stone cross fragment, Repton, Derbyshire	C8th	Derby Museum, Derbyshire	Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle, 'The Repton Stone'

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| 74. | Part of cross-shaft, Bradbourne, Derbyshire | Late C8th–early C9th | Churchyard, All Saints Church, Bradbourne, Derbyshire | Moreland, 'World(s) of the Cross', fig. 1; Rollason, <i>Four Anglian Monuments</i> , pp. 18–27, pls 12–13 |
| 75. | Stone panel depicting the Crucifixion, 'Romsey 2', Romsey, Hampshire | C9th | Chapel of St Anne, Romsey Abbey, Hampshire | Tweddle et al., <i>Corpus Volume IV</i> , pp. 261–3, ill. 453 and 455 |
| 76. | Cross-shaft and part of cross-head, Bakewell, Derbyshire | C9th | Churchyard, All Saints Church, Bakewell, Derbyshire | Rollason, <i>Four Anglian Monuments</i> , pp. 10–17, pls 5 and 10 |
| 77. | Part of cross-shaft, 'Hexham 2', Hexham, Northumberland | Mid C8th | South transept of abbey, Hexham, Northumberland | Cramp, <i>Corpus Volume I</i> , pp. 176–7 |
| 78. | Picture-stone, 'Tängelgårda I', Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden | C8th | Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 4373 | Lindqvist, <i>Gotlands Bildsteine I</i> , figs 86–8; Lindqvist, <i>Gotlands Bildsteine II</i> , pp. 92–3, figs 448 and 450; Nylén and Lamm, <i>Stones</i> , no. 189 |
- Swords
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| 79. | Sword, Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk | C6th–early C7th | British Museum, London 1939,1010.95 | Bruce-Mitford, <i>Sutton Hoo</i> , pp. 273–310; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 87 |
| 80. | Sword, Elms Estate, Croydon, Surrey | C5th–early C6th | British Museum, London 1895,0313.10 | Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 110 |
| 81. | Ring-sword, grave C, Buckland, Dover, Kent | Mid–later C6th | British Museum, London, 1963,1108.751 | Evison, <i>Dover</i> , pp. 214–15; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 102 |
| 82. | Sword, grave 93, Mitcham, Surrey | C5th–early C6th | Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, 1958.3 (sword) and 1954.31 (pommel) | Bidder and Morris, 'Anglo-Saxon Cemetery'; Hill and Thompson, 'The Swords', p. 160 |

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
<i>Swords (continued)</i>				
83.	Sword, grave 192, Mitcham, Surrey	C5th?–C6th	Kingston Museum, Kingston upon Thames, London, L.74	Bidder and Morris, 'Anglo-Saxon Cemetery'; Hill and Thompson, 'The Swords', p. 160; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 310
84.	Sword, grave 39, Patrixbourne, Bifrons, Kent	Mid–later C6th	Maidstone Museum, Kent, 39	Behmer, <i>Das Zweischneidige Schwert</i> , p. 164, Taf. XXXVIII:1; Hawkes, 'Anglo-Saxon Cemetery'
85.	Pommel cap, grave 104, Sarre, Kent	C6th	Maidstone Museum, Kent	Brent, 'Account', p. 175
86.	Sword, Lower Shorne, Higham (Hoo Junction), Kent	C6th	Maidstone Museum, Kent, 4682	Fischer, <i>Les Seigneurs</i> , no. 20, pp. 95–6, fig. 52; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 321
87.	Sword, grave 105, Ramsgate IV, Ozengell, Kent	C6th	English Heritage, Fort Cumberland, Portsmouth, Hampshire	Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 79
88.	Sword, grave 88, Sarre, Kent	Early–mid C6th	Maidstone Museum, Kent, KAS 838	Brent, 'Account', p. 172; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 280; Fischer, <i>Les Seigneurs</i> , no. 25
89.	Sword, grave 56, Ash, Gilton, Kent	Mid–later C6th	World Museum, Liverpool, M.6061	Faussett, <i>Inventorium Sepulchrale</i> , pp. 20–1; Fischer, <i>Les Seigneurs</i> , no. 14, pp. 83–4
90.	Sword with runic inscription, Ash, Gilton, Kent	Mid–later C6th	World Museum, Liverpool, M.6402	Behmer, <i>Das Zweischneidige Schwert</i> , p. 163, Taf. XXXVII:4

91.	Sword with runic letter, King's Field, Faversham, Kent	Mid C6th	British Museum, London, 952.70	Behmer, <i>Das Zweischneidige Schwert</i> , p. 162, Taf. XXXVI:4; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 55; Fischer, <i>Les Seigneurs</i> , no. 6, pp. 57–60
92.	Sword, grave 1081, Saltwood, Stone Farm Broadway, Kent	Late C6th–mid C7th	Maidstone Museum, Kent	Ager, 'Swords'; Cameron, 'Scabbards of Swords'; Gilmour, 'Ethnic Identity'
93.	Ring-sword, grave 3944, Saltwood, Stone Farm Broadway, Kent	Late C6th–mid C7th	Maidstone Museum, Kent	Ager, 'Swords'; Cameron, 'Scabbards of Swords'; Gilmour, 'Ethnic Identity', figs 1a:1, 2
94.	Sword, boat grave XII, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden	Late C6th–early C7th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 9785:XII	Stolpe and Arne, <i>La Nécropole</i> , pp. 45–51, pl. XXXIV
95.	Sword 1, boat grave 6, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden	Mid C7th–C8th	Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden	Arwidsson, <i>Valsgärde 6</i> , 'Schwert I', pp. 44–7, Taf. 12, 14–16, Abb. 37, 39–40, 43
96.	Sword 2, boat grave 6, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden	C7th–C8th	Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden	Arwidsson, <i>Valsgärde 6</i> , 'Schwert II', pp. 47–8, Taf. 12, 16, Abb. 38, 41–3
97.	Sword, Ultuna, Bondkyrko, Uppland, Sweden	Late C6th–early C7th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 2194	Behmer, <i>Das Zweischneidige Schwert</i> , pp. 133, 171, Taf. XLIX:1; Hildebrand, 'Vendelfyndet', pp. 47–50
98.	Sword, boat grave 5, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden	Late C7th	Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden	Behmer, <i>Das Zweischneidige Schwert</i> , p. 171; Lindqvist, 'Vendel-Time', pp. 38–9

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
<i>Swords (continued)</i>				
99.	Ring-sword (Sword 1), boat grave 7, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden	Late C6th–C7th	Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden	Arwidsson, <i>Valsgärde 7</i> , pp. 39–42, Abb. 50–2, 54, 56–61, 63
100.	Sword (Sword 2), boat grave 7, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden	Late C6th–early C7th	Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden	Arwidsson, <i>Valsgärde 7</i> , pp. 42–4, Abb. 50–2, 54, 56–61, 63
101.	Ring-sword, boat grave I, Vendel, Uppland, Sweden	Late C6th–early C7th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 7250:1	Behmer, <i>Das Zweischneidige Schwert</i> , pp. 170–1, Taf. XLVII; Stolpe and Arne, <i>La Nécropole</i> , pp. 10–11, pl. 1
102.	Ring-sword, Vallstenarum, Gotland, Sweden	C6th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 6295	Nerman, <i>Die Vendelzeits</i> , no. 160; Nørgård Jørgensen, <i>Waffen und Gräber</i> , no. 333; Arrhenius, ‘Svärdsknappen’; Behmer, <i>Das Zweischneidige Schwert</i> , pp. 129ff
103.	Sword, Acklam Wold, North Yorkshire	Late C6th–C7th	Yorkshire Museum, York	Ager and Gilmour, ‘Pattern-Welded Anglo-Saxon Sword’
104.	Pommel cap, grave 91, Sarre, Kent	C5th–C6th?	Maidstone Museum, Kent, KAS 838	Brent, ‘Account’, p. 173; Fischer, <i>Les Seigneurs</i> , no. 26; Hawkes and Page, ‘Swords and Runes’, pp. 2–3
105.	Sword, grave XXI, Petersfinger, Wiltshire	Mid C5th–early C6th	Salisbury Museum, Wiltshire	Leeds and Shortt, <i>Anglo-Saxon Cemetery</i> ; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 143
106.	Sword, Woodnesborough II, Coombe, Kent	Mid–late C6th	Saffron Walden Museum, Essex	Ellis Davidson and Webster, ‘Anglo-Saxon Burial’; Fischer, <i>Les Seigneurs</i> , no. 4; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 296

107. Sword, grave 31, Brighthampton, Oxfordshire
C5th–C6th Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
Akerman, 'Report'; Dickinson, 'Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites', pp. 257–63; Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 265
108. Sword, grave 22, Blacknall Field, Pewsey, Wiltshire
Mid–later C6th Wiltshire Heritage Museum, Devizes, Wiltshire
Annable and Eagles, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery*, pp. 8ff
109. Sword, grave 47, Blacknall Field, Pewsey, Wiltshire
C6th Wiltshire Heritage Museum, Devizes, Wiltshire
Annable and Eagles, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery*, pp. 10–11; Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 220
110. Sword, King's Field, Faversham, Kent
Mid–late C6th British Museum, London, 954.70
Behmer, *Das Zweischneidige Schwert*, p. 164, Taf. XXXVIII:2; Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 62; Fischer, *Les Seigneurs*, no. 7, pp. 60–2
111. Sword, grave 2, Collingbourne Ducis, Wiltshire
Early to mid C6th Salisbury Museum, Wiltshire
Gingell, 'Excavation', p. 71; Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 222
112. Sword, grave C3826, Saltwood, Stone Farm Broadway, Kent
C6th–mid C7th Maidstone Museum, Kent
Ager, 'Swords', fig. 91; Cameron, 'Scabbards of Swords'; Riddler and Trevarthen, 'Prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon', pp. 63–4; Gilmour, 'Ethnic Identity' Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 37
113. Sword, King's Field, Faversham, Kent
C6th British Museum, London, 1883.1213.645
Arwidsson, *Valsgärde* 8, pp. 61–3, Taf. 19–21, Abb. 44, 48–9
114. Sword, grave 8, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden
C6th–early C7th Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden
Nørgård Jørgensen, *Waffen und Gräber*, no. 119, Taf. 60.1; Nørgård Jørgensen, 'Elmelunde'
115. Grave II, Elmelunde, Bornholm, Denmark
C6th Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark, C 12294–12300

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
Swords (<i>continued</i>)				
116.	Grave 16, Melsted-Sandhuset, Bornholm, Denmark	C7th	Bornholms Museum, Denmark	Nørgård Jørgensen, <i>Waffen und Gräber</i> , no. 188, Taf. 80.1
117.	Grave 481, Stora and Lille Ihre, Hellvi, Gotland, Sweden	C7th	Gotlands Fornsalen, Gotland, Sweden, C 10222:481	Nørgård Jørgensen, <i>Waffen und Gräber</i> , no. 262; Nerman, <i>Die Vendelzeits</i> , no. 416
118.	Sword, grave 27, Buckland, Dover, Kent	Mid-later C6th	British Museum, London, 1963,1108.128	Evison, <i>Dover</i> , p. 222, figs 15, 69; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 89
119.	Grave II, Kyndby, Sjælland, Bornholm, Denmark	C7th–C8th	Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark, C 26782–822	Nørgård Jørgensen, <i>Waffen und Gräber</i> , no. 117; Ørsnes Christensen, 'Kyndby', figs 17–33; Ørsnes Christensen, 'Sjællandsk Kriegergrav', no. 36
120.	Sword, grave 93, Buckland, Dover, Kent	Mid-later C6th	British Museum, London, 1963,1108.483	Evison, <i>Dover</i> , p. 238, figs 43, 76, text fig. 5, pl. 4b; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 93
121.	Sword, grave 96, Buckland, Dover, Kent	Mid C6th–early C7th	British Museum, London, 1963,1108.509	Evison, <i>Dover</i> , p. 239, figs 46, 77, pl. 4a; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 91
122.	Sword, grave 682, Mucking (Cemetery II), Essex	Later C6th–early C7th	British Museum, London, 1970,0406.605	Hirst and Clark, <i>Excavations at Mucking</i> , p. 199, fig. 63; Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 45
123.	Sword, grave 275, Sarre, Kent	C6th–C7th	Maidstone Museum, Kent	Cameron, <i>Sheaths and Scabbards</i> , no. 7; Perkins, 'Jutish Cemetery', pp. 146, 152–3, fig. 4

124. Sword, Mound 17, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk
Mid-later C6th
British Museum, London, 1991,0411.2852
Carver, *Seventh-Century Princely Burial*, p. 244.4; Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 84
125. Sword, Taplow, Buckinghamshire
C6th–C7th
British Museum, London, 1883,1214.4
Stevens, 'On the Remains'; Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 83
126. Sword, Caenby, Lincolnshire
Early C7th
Unverified
Jarvis, 'Account', pp. 38–9
127. Sword, Bowerslow, Tissington, Derbyshire
C7th
British Museum, London, 1873,0602.104
Lucas, 'Notice'; Cameron, *Sheathis and Scabbards*, no. 42
128. Sword, 'princely' grave, Prittlewell, Essex
Late C6th
Southend Museum, Essex
Blackmore et al., *The Prittlewell*
129. Sword, grave 33, Buckland, Dover, Kent
Mid-later C6th
British Museum, London, 1963,1108.174
Evison, *Dover*, pp. 225–6, figs 20, 70
130. Sword, Wensley Churchyard, North Yorkshire
Early C10th
British Museum, London, 1965,0703.1
Redmond, *Viking Burial*, p. 110, fig. A6.24; Wilson, 'Some Neglected', p. 42
131. Sword, Reading, Berkshire
Late C8th–early C9th
Private collection
East, 'Lead Model'
132. Sword, grave K/XX, Søndre Bikhølberget Kaupang, Norway
C9th–C10th?
Universitetet i Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, Norway
Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen, *Kaupang-Funnene, Bind II*, p. 48, pl. 42a
133. Sword, grave 561a, Birka, Norr om Borg, Uppland, Sweden
C9th–C10th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000:Bj,561
Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 2*, Taf. 1.2; Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 1*, pp. 180–1; Thålin-Bergman, 'Übersicht'

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
Swords (<i>continued</i>)				
134.	Sword 'Ab', boat grave, Haihabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany	C9th	Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany	Mülle-Wille, <i>Das Bootkammergrab</i> , pp. 35–43; Arents and Eisenschmidt, <i>Die Gräber</i> , p. 113, Taf. 49
135.	Sword 'Ab1', boat grave, Haihabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany	Late C8th–early C9th	Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany	Mülle-Wille, <i>Das Bootkammergrab</i> , pp. 43–50; Arents and Eisenschmidt, <i>Die Gräber</i> , p. 113, Taf. 50
136.	Sword 'Bb', boat grave, Haihabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany	C9th	Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany	Mülle-Wille, <i>Das Bootkammergrab</i> , pp. 66–78; Arents and Eisenschmidt, <i>Die Gräber</i> , pp. 115–17, Taf. 53
137.	Sword, grave 942, Birka, Hemlanden, Uppland, Sweden	Late C8th–mid C9th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000:Bj.942	Arbman, <i>Birka: Die Gräber</i> 2, Taf. 1:1; Arbman, <i>Birka: Die Gräber</i> 1, pp. 364–6, Abb. 315; Duczko, <i>Filigree and Granulation</i> , pp. 104–5
138.	Sword, grave 62, Haihabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany	First half C10th	Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany	Arents and Eisenschmidt, <i>Die Gräber</i> , p. 41, Taf. 62
139.	Sword, chamber grave II, Haihabu, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany	Mid C9th	Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, Germany	Arents and Eisenschmidt, <i>Die Gräber</i> , pp. 96–7, Taf. 33
140.	Sword, Långtora, Uppland, Sweden	Mid C9th–C10th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 20348	Arbman, 'Kammargrav från Vikingatiden'

141. Sword, boat grave I, Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden
Second half C10th
Gustavianum Uppsala University Museum, Uppsala, Sweden
Museum Gustavianum Research Group, *Valsgärde 1*, p. 43
142. Sword, grave K/IV gr. II, Søndre Bikhjølberget, Kaupang, Norway
C9th–C10th
Universitetet i Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, Norway
Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen, *Kaupang-Funnene, Bind II*, p. 24, pl. 7
143. Sword, grave K/IX, Søndre Bikhjølberget, Kaupang, Norway
Mid C9th–C10th
Universitetet i Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, Norway
Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen, *Kaupang-Funnene, Bind II*, p. 35, pl. 29
144. Sword, Santon Downham, Norfolk
Mid C9th–C10th
British Museum, London, 1883,0726.1
Evison, 'Viking Age Burial'
145. Sword, grave 644, Birka, Norr om Borg, Uppland, Sweden
C9th–mid C10th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.644
Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 1*, pp. 221–6, Abb. 182 and 183:17
146. Sword, grave 731, Birka, Hemlanden, Uppland, Sweden
C10th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.731
Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 1*, pp. 253–5, Abb. 206:1
147. Sword, grave 735, Birka, Hemlanden, Uppland, Sweden
C10th–C11th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.735
Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 1*, pp. 256–9, Abb. 208:9
148. Sword, grave 750, Birka, Hemlanden, Uppland, Sweden
C9th–mid C10th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.750
Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 1*, pp. 267–72, Abb. 217:40
149. Sword, grave 823a, Birka, Hemlanden, Uppland, Sweden
Early–mid C10th
Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.823
Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 1*, pp. 296–7, Abb. 245; Arbman, *Birka: Die Gräber 2*, Taf. 4:2

No.	Item	Date	Location	Key source
Swords (<i>continued</i>)				
150.	Sword, grave 834, Birka, Hemlanden, Uppland, Sweden	Mid C9th–C11th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.834	Arbman, <i>Birka: Die Gräber 1</i> , pp. 304–8, Abb. 252:1; Thålin-Bergman, 'Übersicht'
151.	Sword, grave 581, Birka, Björkö, Uppland, Sweden	Mid–late C10th	Historiska Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, 34000: Bj.581	Arbman, <i>Birka: Die Gräber 1</i> , pp. 188–90, Abb.143; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 'A Female Viking Warrior'

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Index

Page numbers in bold refer to illustrations and their captions.

Abel 128
 Abraham 27, 28, 30, 39, 44, 120, 123,
 128 n.136, 134 n.163
 Acklam Wold (North Yorkshire) 69, **72**,
 81, 172
 Æthelred II 'the Unready', king of
 England 137
 Æthelstan, king of England 136, 137
 n.178
 Æthelstan, ætheling 136–7
 Ælfgar, ealdorman 137 n.178
 Alfred the Great, king of Wessex 19,
 136
 amulets 46, 51, 87
 sword-shaped 23, 24, 51, 55, 147
Andreas 124
 Ånge, Gotland (Sweden) *see under*
 picture-stones
 antler 7, 61
 Archaeological Data Service 18, 59, 113
 Ardre, Gotland (Sweden) *see under*
 picture-stones
 Arnórr Þórðarson, skald 119–20, 132
 arrows 44, 47, 124, 158
 artefact biography 2, 12, 158
 Ash, Gilton (Kent) 14, 64, 65, 78, **80**,
 140, 170
 ash (tree) 76
 axes 153, 154, 155, 158

Battle of Brunanburh, The 115, 124
Battle of Maldon, The 120, 121, 127, 128,
 147
Battle of Svoldr, The 124
 battle spoils 10, 61, 87
 Bayeux Tapestry *see under* embroideries
 beaded wire *see* filigree
 Bedale Hoard *see under* hoards,
 hoarding
 Bejsebakken (Denmark) 23 n.15, 24, 162
 Benedictinal of St Æthelwold *see under*
 manuscripts

Beowulf 13, 111, 115, 116, 119 n.51, 120,
 121–2, 124, 125, 126–7, 128, 129,
 132, 134, 135, 136, 140, 141, 143,
 144, 146, 155, 157
 Bersi Skáld-Torfuson, skald 125
 Bible, Biblical 30, 54, 57, 128 n.136, 130,
 147, 148
bill (sword) 114, 121
 Birka, Uppland (Sweden) 27, 30, 97,
 99, 100, **103**, 108, 150, 162, 163, 175,
 176, 177, 178
 grave 581 9, 108–9, 147, 178
 Björn krepphendí, skald 122, 132
 Blacknall Field, Pewsey (Wiltshire) 83,
 85, 92 n.64, 173
 bone 14, 61, 88, 94
 Bornholm (Denmark) 24, 59, 85 n.43,
 162, 173–4
 Bragi inn gamli Boddason, skald 112
 n.3, 117, 118, 131, 132
 Brailsford (Derbyshire) 30, **31**, 163
 Brávellir, battle of 51
 Brea 126
 Brighthampton (Oxfordshire) 83, 173
 Broa, Gotland (Sweden) *see under*
 picture-stones
 Brynjólfr úlfaldi, skald 125
 Buckland, Dover (Kent) 62, **64**, 78, 86,
 87, 89, 91, **94**, **95**, 144, 147, 169, 174,
 175
 burial, burials
 'cross-gendered' 9, 93
 double 95, 108, 147
 furnished 47, 50, 59, 105, 144, 157
 decline of 96, 104, 109–10, 148
 grave goods 9, 50, 93, 96, 106
 mourners 10, 47, 50, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93,
 105, 107, 109, 143
 sexing 9, 93, 147
 'tableaux' 50, 88–93, 96, 105–9, 110,
 144
 warrior 8–9, 50, 145
 weapon 2, 8, 9, 144, 145, 146
 see also funeral, funerals
 Bury Psalter *see under* manuscripts

Index

- Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex 120,
 121, 128, 129
- Caenby (Lincolnshire) 37, 39, 91, 165,
 175
- Cain 41, 128
- Canterbury (Kent) 35
- Charlemagne, king of the Franks 137
- Chessell Down (Isle of Wight) 14, 140
- chip-carved ornament 62, 69
- Christ 30, 36, 37
- Christ III* 128
- Christianity *see under* religion, beliefs
- churchmen *see* ecclesiastical figures
- clerics *see* ecclesiastical figures
- Cnut 30, 32, 57, 152
- coins, coinage 18, 35 n.47, 46, 47, 142,
 152
- 'Sword St Peter' type 46, 152, 166
- Collingbourne Ducis (Wiltshire) 85, 173
- combat *see* warfare
- Conan 1 n.1
- Constantine, Roman emperor 137 n.178
- Continent, Continental 4, 5, 11, 61 n.4,
 81
- conversion *see under* religion, beliefs
- Coombe, Woodnesborough (Kent) 81,
 83, 84, 172
- copper-alloy 62, 69, 97, 121
- corrosion 61, 62, 67, 69, 97, 144
- Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* 1 n.1
- Crucifixion 54, 169
- CT *see* three-dimensional X-ray
 computed tomography (CT)
- Danes 120, 129, 130
- Darraðarljóð* 131
- David, king of Israel and Judah 30
- depletion gilding 6
- Derbyshire 57
- Drävie, Uppland (Sweden) *see under*
 runestones
- dróttkvætt* 128
- Eadmund 'Ironside' 137
- Eadweard, warrior in *The Battle of*
Maldon 128
- ecclesiastical figures 29
- as artistic patrons 27, 54
- in battle 29
- monks 55, 134
- Eddic poetry *see* poetry *under* Old
 Norse
- Edix Hill (Cambridgeshire) 19, 56, 160
- Edward the Confessor, king of
 England 57
- Egyptians 135, 152
- Einarr Skúlason, skald 120, 132–3
- Eiríkr 'Bloodaxe', king of Norway and
 York 46
- Eketorp, Öland (Sweden) 23, 162
- Elms Estate (Croydon) 62, 169
- embroideries 18, 51, 150
- Bayeux Tapestry 18, 20, 21, 23, 27,
 30–4, 35 n.47 and n.48, 36, 37, 38,
 48, 49, 51, 53, 146, 160
- Milan (Italy) 18, 160
- Oseberg (Norway) 22, 23, 25, 39, 44,
 48, 51, 55, 142, 147, 160
- Överhögdal (Sweden) 18, 160
- Excalibur 157
- Exodus* (Old English poem) 120, 123,
 128, 134 n.163, 135, 152
- Eyvindr Finsson, skald 121, 129–30
- Fáfnir 44
- fighting *see* warfare
- filigree 62, 63, 64, 69, 72, 81, 100
- Finn, king of the Frisians 128
- Finnsburh* poem fragment 123, 134
- Franks Casket 22, 48, 160
- Frome, river (Dorset) 140
- fullers *see* swords *under* blade
- funeral, funerals 39, 84, 144
see also burial, burials
- Game of Thrones* 1 n.1
- Gamla Uppsala, Uppland (Sweden) 37,
 165
- Geatland, Geats 120
- gender 3, 93
see also under burial, burials, swords
under identity, swords *under*
 masculinity, women
- genomic analysis 9, 108
- Genesis, Book of 39
- Genesis* (Old English poem) 111
- Germany, Germanic 5, 15
- gifts, gift giving, gift exchange *see under*
 swords
- gilding 62, 64, 67, 69, 70–1, 72, 84, 121
see also depletion gilding, gold
- gladius* 89
- God (Christian) 30, 37, 120, 128, 132
- Gök, Södermanland (Sweden) *see under*
 runestones

Index

- gold 6, 62, 81–2, 97, 116, 121
see also depletion gilding, gilding
- Goliath 140
- Gotland (Sweden) 19, 39, 41, 59, 146
 picture-stones *see* picture-stones
- graffiti 27, 46
- Grámr 44
- grave goods *see under* burial, burials
- graves *see* burial, burials
- Greece 146
- Grendel 120, 125, 127
 Grendel's mere 116, 125, 140, 143, 144
- Grendel's mother 115, 116, 121, 122, 126
- grip, hand-grip *see* swords *under* hilt
- grip mounts *see* swords *under* hilt
- guards *see* swords *under* hilt
- Guthhere, king of the Burgundians 132
- guldgubber* 24, 29, 162
- Guy of Ponthieu 36
- Haithabu (Germany) 97, 100, **101–2**, 104, 176
- Hákon inn góði, king of Norway 136
- Hallfreðr Óttarson, skald 125, 127–8
- handedness 89–90, 92
- Hårby (Denmark) 51, **52**, 168
- Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson, king of Norway 115, 119
- Haraldr hárfagri, king of Norway 125
- Harley Psalter *see under* manuscripts
- Harold II Godwinson, king of England 20, 34, 37, **38**, 57
- Hastings, battle of 29
- Heathobards 129
- Healfdene 120
- Hebrews 41
- Hedeby (Germany) *see* Haithabu (Germany)
- heirlooms 12
See also under swords
- helmets 6 n.29, 29 n.27, 47, 154
- Hengest 128
- Heorot 125, 129
- heriot 29
- Herod 36, 37 n.50
- Hildegryth, betrothed to Waldere 132
- Hildir 117–18, 132
- Hneitir 120, 136
- hoards, hoarding 2, 144
 Bedale Hoard 11, 143
 Staffordshire Hoard 6, 10–11, 29, 59, 62, **63**, 87–8, 116, 143
- Holofernes 125, 130
- horn 7, 23, 61 and n.5
- Howard, Robert E. 1 n.1
- Hrethel 120
- Hrothgar 116, 120, 125
- Hrunting 13, 115, 119, 120, 121, 122, 125, 126, 129
- Hunlafing 119, 120
- hunting 36, 158
- Hygelac 124, 125
- Icelandic sagas *see* sagas, saga literature
- iconography (methodology) 18
- identity 7, 73–5, 145, 148
 cultural 135
 gender 8–9
 social status 2, 7, 30–4, 36, 50, 56–7, 107, 110, 148, 151–2, 157, 158
 visual, of sword 87, 104–5, 116, 139, 141, 143, 153
 warrior 9, 47, 50, 110, 135, 146, 157, 158
- Illerup Ådal (Denmark) 87
- illuminated manuscripts *see* manuscripts
- incised ornament 62, 63–4, 72, 97, 100
- iron 14, 97, 99, 104, 115
- Isaac 27, 39, 44, 128 n.136
- Israel, Israelites 135, 152
- Jackson, Peter 1 n.1
- Jerusalem 48
- Jesus *see* Christ
- Jews 48
- Joshua 30
- Judith* 114, 115, 124, 125, 130, 147
- Junius manuscript *see under* manuscripts
- Kaupang (Norway) 97, 99, 104, 107, 175, 177
- kennings 112–13
- Kent 7, 59
- Kill Bill* 1 n.1
- King's Field, Faversham (Kent) 67, **68**, 75–6, 83, 85, 171, 173
- Kirby Hill (North Yorkshire) 44, 166
- Kragehul (Denmark) 87
- Kvernbitr 136
- Långtora, Uppland (Sweden) 104, 176
- law codes 136
- Ledberg, Östergötland (Sweden) *see under* runestones

- Lee, Ang 1 n.1
 left-handedness *see* handedness
 Leggbiti 136
 Lincoln (Lincolnshire) 46
 Lincolnshire 57
 Lindisfarne (Northumberland) 42, 55, 165
 Lindqvist, Sune 42
Lord of the Rings, The 1 n.1
 lords, lordship 11, 13, 50, 81
 Lower Shorne, Kent 65, 66, 76, 78, 170
 Lund, Skåne (Sweden) *see under* runestones

 Magnús berfœttr, king of Norway 136
 Magnús inn góði, king of Norway 119–20, 136
 mail-armor, mail-coats 34, 48, 118, 135
 manuscripts 18–19, 29, 35, 53, 54, 55, 140, 150
 Benedictional of St Æthelwold 41, 165
 Bury Psalter 30, 36, 37, 163
 Harley Psalter 22, 35 n.48, 37, 39, 41, 161
 Junius manuscript 41, 163
 Old English Hexateuch 22, 27, 35 n.47 and n.48, 36, 41, 42, 160
 Prudentius, *Psychomachia* 37, 39, 41, 50, 147, 164–5
 Tiberius Psalter 36, 140, 164
 New Minster *Liber Vitae* 30, 57, 152, 163
Maxims II 122
mece (sword) 114, 121
 Mercia (kingdom) 87, 137
 Middleton (North Yorkshire) 144, 163
 Mimming 119, 120, 132, 140
 Mitcham (Surrey) 64, 170
 monks *see under* ecclesiastical figures
 Moses 30, 135
 Mucking (Essex) 91, 174

 Nægling 119, 120, 121, 136
 Nero, Roman emperor 41 n.67
 New Minster *Liber Vitae* *see under* manuscripts
 niello 62, 64, 78, 84
 Nissan, battle of 124
 Normans 30, 34, 48
 Northbourne, Finglesham (Kent) 87
 Nottinghamshire 57

 oaths, oath swearing 11, 37, 50, 81
 object biography *see* artefact biography
 Odin 39, 51, 126, 152
 Odo, bishop of Bayeux 29
 Offa, king of Mercia 137
 Offa, warrior in *The Battle of Maldon* 127, 129
 Óláfr Haraldsson, king of Norway 116, 120, 125 n.111, 130, 133, 136
 Óláfr Tryggvason, king of Norway 128, 155
 Óláfs saga helga 136
 Old English Hexateuch *see under* manuscripts
 Old English poetry *see under* poetry
 Orion (personified constellation) 24, 141
 Oseberg (Norway)
 embroideries *see under* embroideries
 wooden cart 55, 168
 Österfärnebo, Gästrikland (Sweden) 104
 Óttar svarti, skald 121
 Ozengell (Kent) 65, 170

 pagan, paganism *see under* religion, beliefs
 patronage, artistic 27, 29, 54–5
 Patrichbourne (Kent) 64, 65, 170
 Penda, king of Mercia 87
 Petersen Type swords *see* swords *under* typology
 Petersfinger (Wiltshire) 78, 83, 92 n.64, 94, 172
 phallic imagery 8 n.36
 Pharaoh 27, 30, 36, 41, 57
 picture-stones 22, 39, 41, 42, 54, 146
 Änge, Gotland (Sweden) 41, 165
 Ardre, Gotland (Sweden) 48, 51, 165
 Broa, Gotland (Sweden) 165
 Stora Hammars, Gotland (Sweden) 39, 161
 Tängelgårda, Gotland (Sweden) 39, 42, 43, 169
 Pilate, Pontius 36
 poetry
 Old English 111, 132, 134–5, 150
 Old Norse
 Eddic 112 n.4
 skaldic 111–13, 132–3, 134–5, 150
 pommel *see* swords *under* hilt
 Portable Antiquities Scheme 55

Index

- Prittlewell (Essex) 11, 92, 175
promachoi 146
 Prudentius, *Psychomachia* *see under* manuscripts
 punched ornament 62, 64, 75, 76
- Ramsund, Södermanland, (Sweden) *see under* runestones
 Reading (Berkshire) 97 and n.73, 100, 175
- relief ornament 62, 69, 70–1, 97
 religion, beliefs 3, 54
 Christianity 54, 55, 92, 132–3
 conversion 55, 132, 151, 153
 pagan, paganism 37, 132–3, 151
 repair *see under* swords
 Repton (Derbyshire) 57, 97 n.70, 168
 retainers 11, 13, 30, 34, 50
 Reuben 30
 Riddles, Old English 115, 127
Rifleman's Creed, The 155–6
 ring-and-dot ornament 62–4
 ring-swords *see under* swords
 rings 11, 117–18
Rune Poem, Old English 75–6
 runes, runic inscriptions
 on swords 64, 75–6, 78, 104, 116, 140, 155
 runestones 22, 47 n.83, 54
 Drävle, Uppland (Sweden) 44, 166
 Gök, Södermanland (Sweden) 44, 166
 Ledberg, Östergötland (Sweden) 35 n.47, 47 n.81, 164
 Lund, Skåne (Sweden) 35, 164
 Ramsund, Södermanland (Sweden) 44, 161
 Ryda, Västergötland (Sweden) 46–7, 166
 Skokloster, Uppland (Sweden) 30, 150, 162
 Söderby, Uppland (Sweden) 161
 Sparlösa, Västergötland (Sweden) 30, 161
 Ryda, Västergötland (Sweden) *see under* runestones
- sagas, saga literature 16, 111 and n.2, 119, 136, 150
 Konungasögur ('Kings' Sagas') 112, 136
 Saltwood (Kent) 67, 85, 86, 171, 173
 Santon Downham (Norfolk) 107, 177
- Sarre (Kent) 56, 64, 65, 67, 76–7, 78, 81, 87, 91, 168, 170, 172, 174
 Saul 30, 36
 scabbards *see under* swords
 scanning electron microscopy with energy-dispersive X-ray analysis (SEM-EDX) 6 n.28
 Schwarzenegger, Arnold 1 n.1
 scientific analysis 6
 see also depletion gilding, three-dimensional X-ray computed tomography (CT), X-ray fluorescence (XRF), scanning electron microscopy with energy-dispersive X-ray analysis (SEM-EDX)
- sculpture, stone 18, 19, 47, 48, 144, 150
 seaxes 91, 95
 SEM-EDX *see* scanning electron microscopy with energy-dispersive X-ray analysis (SEM-EDX)
- Shepherdswell with Coldred, Sibertswold (Kent) 89
 shields 6 n.29, 35, 44–5, 48, 51, 96 n.69, 127, 128, 131, 135, 142, 154
 ships 41, 44–5, 48, 76 n.16
 Sif, wife of Thor 117, 118, 131
 Sigurðr (Sigurd) 44, 47, 141, 142
 Sigvatr Þórðarson, skald 130
 silver 6, 62, 97, 100, 104, 116
 skaldic poetry *see* poetry *under* Old Norse
 skalds 111–12, 119, 122, 125, 133, 135
 Skokloster, Uppland (Sweden) *see under* runestones
 Snartemo, Vest-Agder (Norway) 83
 Snorri Sturluson 118, 120, 136
 Söderby, Uppland (Sweden) *see under* runestones
 Somme, battle of the 154
Solomon and Saturn 127
 Sorte Muld (Denmark) 23 n.12, 24, 29, 150, 162
 Sparlösa, Västergötland (Sweden) *see under* runestones
- spears 6 n.29, 127, 153–4, 158
 animated or wielderless 44–6, 122, 142
 in art 26–7, 42
 bequeathed 131
 in burials 91, 92–3, 96, 106
 in combat 53, 56, 128, 155
 sacrificial weapon 39
 in watercourses 109 n.92, 142

- St John 152 n.18
 St Laurence 41
 St Peter 41, 46, 166
 St Paul 41
 Staffordshire Hoard *see under* hoards,
 hoarding
Star Wars 1 n.1
 Steinn Herdísarson, skald 124
 Stora Hammars, Gotland (Sweden) *see*
 under picture-stones
 Suffolk 57
 Sutton Hoo (Suffolk) 11, 89, 91, 142
 helmet *Pressbleche* 23 and n.12, 27, 37,
 39, 42 n.75, 157, 161
 sword 20, 81–2, 85, 89–90, 169
 swords
 animated or wielderless 14, 42–7,
 55–6, 122–4, 133, 134, 141–2, 150
 availability 56, 148, 149, 152
 bequeathed 110, 131, 136–7 and
 n.178, 147
 blade 4–5, 14, 19, 23, 61, 86, 114–16,
 117 and n.43, 118, 134, 142–3
 edges 86, 115–16, 124
 fuller 23, 24, 117 n.43
 pattern-welding 5, 23, 24, 86, 105,
 115, 156
 in burials 5, 7, 9–10, 59, 61, 88–93,
 96–7, 105–8, 110, 142
 circulation 7, 10, 12, 62, 85, 104, 110,
 111, 153
 in combat 15, 36, 42–4, 86, 148–9,
 155–6, 158
 damage 61, 81, 85, 104, 144
 execution weapon 36, 39, 41, 128
 gifts 10, 11, 61, 125, 127–8
 heirlooms 9, 10, 12, 61, 86, 120, 121,
 155
 hilt 4, 6, 19, 23–6, 29, 34, 59, 61, 62,
 63, 69, 73, 76, 81, 89, 97, 99, 100,
 104, 105, 113, 116–19, 133, 134,
 136, 140, 142–3, 150
 grip, hand-grip 27, 39, 69, 72, 74,
 81, 116, 130
 grip mounts 69, 72–3, 81–2, 83, 97,
 100, 107 and n.43
 guards 23 and n.15, 27, 30, 69, 72,
 81, 82, 84, 86, 87, 97, 100, 104,
 142, 144
 pommel 24, 30, 62, 63, 64–72, 73,
 75–86, 87, 89–90, 97, 100–4, 105,
 140, 142, 146, 150, 155
 tri-lobed 24, 30–5, 50, 147
 inscribed 5, 23, 24 and n.13, 140
 runes *see under* runes, runic
 inscriptions
 ULFBERHT swords 5, 24, 140–1
 manufacture 4–6, 12, 14, 105, 110,
 113, 115, 118, 148
 masculinity and 8, 50, 53
 modified 12, 61, 78–85, 104, 105, 109,
 141, 142, 149, 150
 named 1 n.1, 13–14, 111, 119–20, 134,
 136, 150
 see also Hneitir, Hrunding,
 Hunláfing, Kvernbitir, Leggbitir,
 Mimming, Nægling
 old, ancient 12–13, 29–35, 57–8,
 61–88, 97–105, 120–2, 137, 141,
 147–8, 149–50, 152–3, 157–8
 ownership 7–8 and n.35, 12, 50, 143,
 145, 146, 147, 152, 157
 personification 119–22
 popular culture and 1
 repaired, refurbished 2, 12 n.58, 61,
 85–6, 104, 141, 149
 ring-swords 11, 50, 78–81, 146
 in art 24, 26, 29, 39, 50
 in poetry 117–18
 ritually ‘killed’ 10, 87–8 and n.53
 sacrificial weapon 10, 36, 39, 44, 87,
 128
 scabbard 6, 19–23, 59, 61, 62, 75, 76,
 83, 85–6, 87, 89, 104, 105, 143
 in art 19–23, 26, 27, 29, 34, 39
 mouth-band 19, 20, 83, 85
 in poetry 113–14, 128
 sword-belt, harness 19, 21, 22, 27, 29,
 59, 75, 113–14, 153–4
 typology 4–5, 158
 Petersen Type swords
 Særtypp 1 or Mannheim type 10
 n.77
 Type D 30, 100 n.77
 Type K 24
 Type V 100 n.77
 Type Z 27, 28
 in watercourses 10, 59, 96, 109 and
 n.92, 142, 144, 147
 wear, worn condition 2, 12, 14, 61–77,
 81–2, 84, 89–90, 93, 97–104, 140,
 141, 144, 149–50
 worn on the body 22, 36, 75, 88–90,
 106–7, 153–4
 sword-bearer 30, 36
 sword-polisher 136

- Tanberg (Norway) 44, 166
 Tängelgård, Gotland (Sweden) *see*
under picture-stones
 Taplow (Buckinghamshire) 11, 91, 175
 Tarantino, Quentin 1 n.1
 Thor 131, 152
 three-dimensional X-ray computed
 tomography (CT) 5, 6
 Tiberius Psalter *see under* manuscripts
 Tissington (Derbyshire) 91 n.62, 175
 Titus, son of Vespasian 48
 Tolkien, J. R. R. 1 n.1
 Torslunda, Öland (Sweden)
 helmet *Pressbleche* dies 23, 24, 26, 37,
 50, 162
 typology *see under* swords
- ULFBERHT swords *see* swords *under*
 inscribed
- Ultuna, Uppland (Sweden) 67, 69, 71,
 72, 73, 76, 171
 Unferth 120, 125, 126–7, 135
 Uppland (Sweden) 91, 142
- Valerian, Roman emperor 41 n.67
 Valhalla 131
 Valkyries 51, 52, 119, 131, 132, 147,
 167–8
 Vallstenarum, Gotland (Sweden) 69,
 78, 79, 81, 82, 83, 150, 172
 Valsgarde, Uppland (Sweden) 11, 88
 n.55
 helmet *Pressbleche* from 27, 37, 39,
 42 n.75
 grave 7 22, 50, 161
 grave 8 162
 swords from 12 n.58, 76
 grave 1 105–6, 177
 grave 5 69, 72, 171
 grave 6 67, 70, 86, 88, 171–2
 grave 7 69, 88, 172
 grave 8 85, 173
- Vellekla 124
 Vendel, Uppland (Sweden)
 helmet *Pressbleche* from 27
 grave XIV 20, 22, 24, 39, 40, 160
 swords from
 grave I 69, 72, 74, 88 and n.56
 grave XII 67, 171, 172
- véttrim* 117 n.43
 Vices and Virtues 51, 147
 Viking period 10, 14, 46, 108, 112, 121,
 135
 violence 53–5, 143–4, 148–9, 154–5, 158
 Vladimir-Suzdal (Russian
 Federation) 44
- Waldere 120, 125, 132, 140
 war-gear 27, 29, 34, 35, 44, 56, 87
see also arrows, axes, mail-armour,
 seaxes, shields, spears, swords
- Wareham (Dorset) 140
 warfare 136 n.170, 146, 154–6
 warriors
 as artistic patrons 27–9, 54
 burials *see under* burial, burials
 definition of 8–9, 15, 145, 147
 hierarchy of 48–50, 126–8, 135
 identity *see under* identity
 spears and 48, 76 n.16, 125, 126
 swords and 47–50, 54–5, 56–7, 125–6,
 129–30, 134, 141–2, 145, 148,
 151–2, 155, 158
 women warriors *see under* women
- Waterloo, battle of 154
 weapon burials *see under* burial, burials
 wear *see under* swords
 weaving beaters 94 n.65, 107, 147
 Weland 125, 140
 Wensley Churchyard (North
 Yorkshire) 97, 98, 100, 104, 175
- whetstones 115
 Widia 125
 Widsith 124
 Wiglaf 124, 125, 126, 127, 146
 William of Normandy, king of
 England 36, 37, 57
 wills 29, 109, 111, 131, 136–7, 140, 147
 Winchester (Hampshire) 35 n.45
- women
 and swords 8–9, 50–3, 58, 93–6,
 107–9, 110, 130–1, 147, 157
 warriors 9, n.43, 96, 108–9
 wood 23, 76 n.16, 143
 Wulfmær, nephew of Byrhtnoth 128,
 129
- X-ray fluorescence (XRF) 6 n.28
 XRF *see* X-ray fluorescence (XRF)
- York (North Yorkshire) 46, 142, 152
 Yorkshire 57
- Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, skald 132
 Þorfinnr Sigurðarson, jarl of
 Orkney 119

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SWORDS WERE SPECIAL in Anglo-Saxon England. Their names, deeds and pedigrees were enshrined in writing. Many were curated for generations, revealed by their worn and mended condition. Few ended their lives as casual discards, placed instead in graves, hoards and watercourses as part of ritualised acts. Contemporary sources leave no doubt that complex social meanings surrounded these weapons, transcending their use on the battlefield; but they have yet to transcend the traditional view that their primary social function was as status symbols. Even now, half a century after the first major study of Anglo-Saxon swords, their wider significance within their world has yet to be fully articulated.

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SUE BRUNNING is Curator of Early Medieval European Insular Collections at The British Museum.

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